



Demon Lord, Retry!

6

Author: Kurone Kanzaki
Illustrator: Makoto Iino

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DEMON LORD, RETRY!

6







Butterscotch Butterfly

Yu Kirino

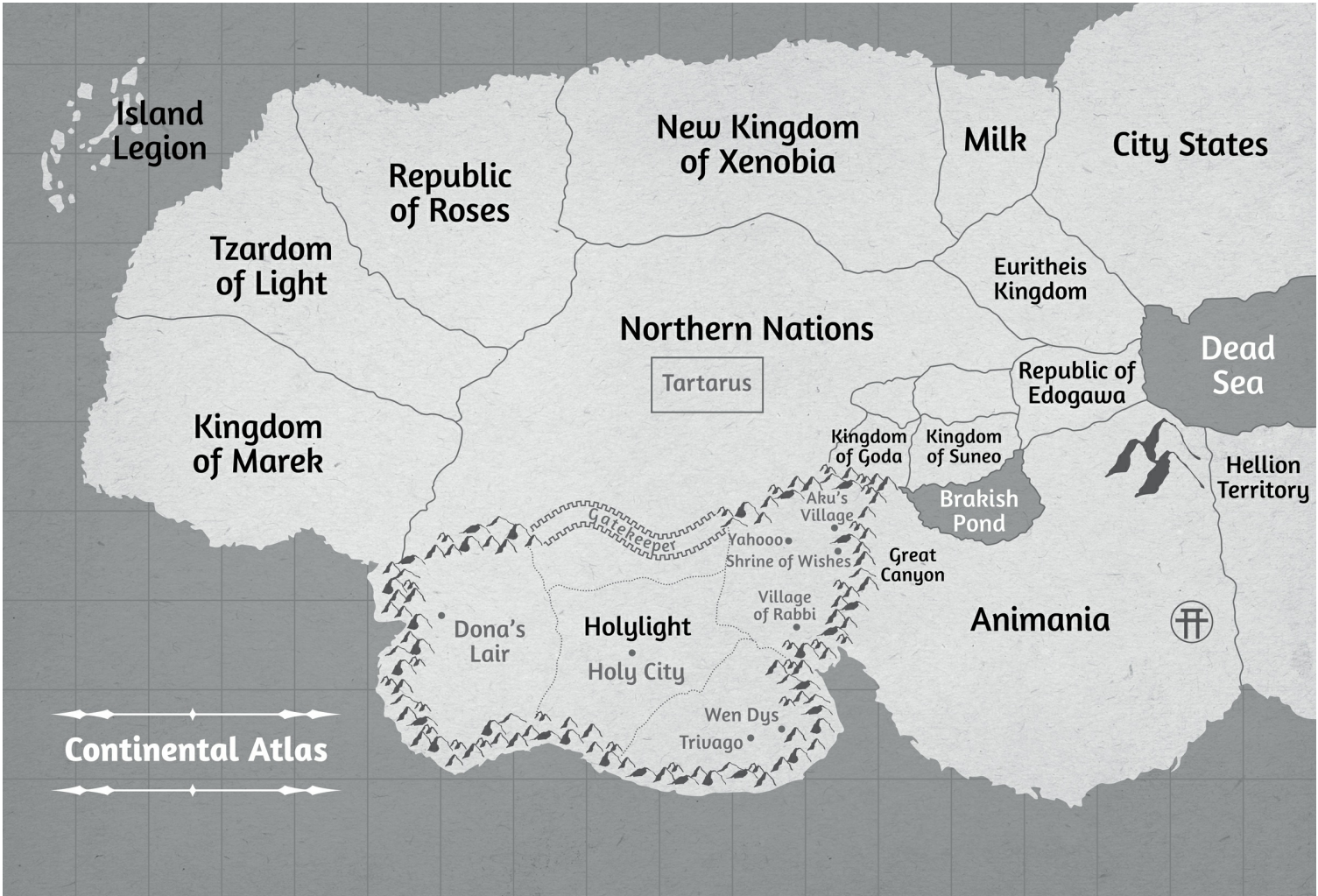
Mynk

Yukikaze

Luna Elegant

Aku

Eagle



The Three Worlds Of Demon Lord, Retry!

Where the main story takes place. The environment is similar to Earth's, and the language of the people is similar to Japanese. Akira Ono was transported to this fantasy world and began his journey as the Demon Lord. This world was created by someone long ago, now forsaken by gods and detested by the Angels.

Different
World

Real
World

Infinity
Game

Modern day Earth. Akira Ono lived here, in Japan, before arriving in the fantasy world. Nothing has been shown of it post-2016.

A large-scale game that was run by Akira Ono. Revolved around week-long, 24/7 battle royales of hellish intensity... With only one victor. Each week, player stats and equipment were reset, forcing them to *retry* again and again.

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Chapter 8: Return of the Demon Lord

In the Wake of the Storm

—Royal Palace, Animania.

The Animadmirals poured out of the conference room, one after the other. Their facial expressions ran the gamut: cheerful, enraged, woeful, or even no expression at all. They had all just been briefed on the *incident*, meaning the incident with Belphegor, of course. Their meeting had devolved into disorder, with some blaming the apes for going too far, others applauding them, and some others outraged that they weren't let in on the fun. While this was hardly the first time the Animadmirals failed to reach a consensus, without the Dragonborn to keep them together, the meeting had adjourned without a resolution.

"Ooh ah ah! See the look on their faces? My unparalleled bravery put a bitter taste in their mouths," Monkey Magic boasted.

"You were the star of the show," Xiaoshou chimed in. "My only concern is that Lady Tatsu was absent..." he added in concern.

"Lady Tatsu must be ecstatic at the news of my success!"

"Good thing *you've* got it all figured out..."

As they bantered on, there was a woman standing teary-eyed in the hall. This Animadmiral was a hound-hybrid. She and Monkey Magic's relationship was not dissimilar to that of the dog and the monkey in the Chinese legend of the Zodiac.

"Oh, the mutt's wetting her sniffer with tears," the monkey jeered. "Moved by my bravery and glory? Hm?"

The hound glared at him.

"Ooh ah ah! You finally understand my greatness? Speak! Paw! Roll over!"

"Watch your back... This isn't over." With that, she strode away, sobbing.

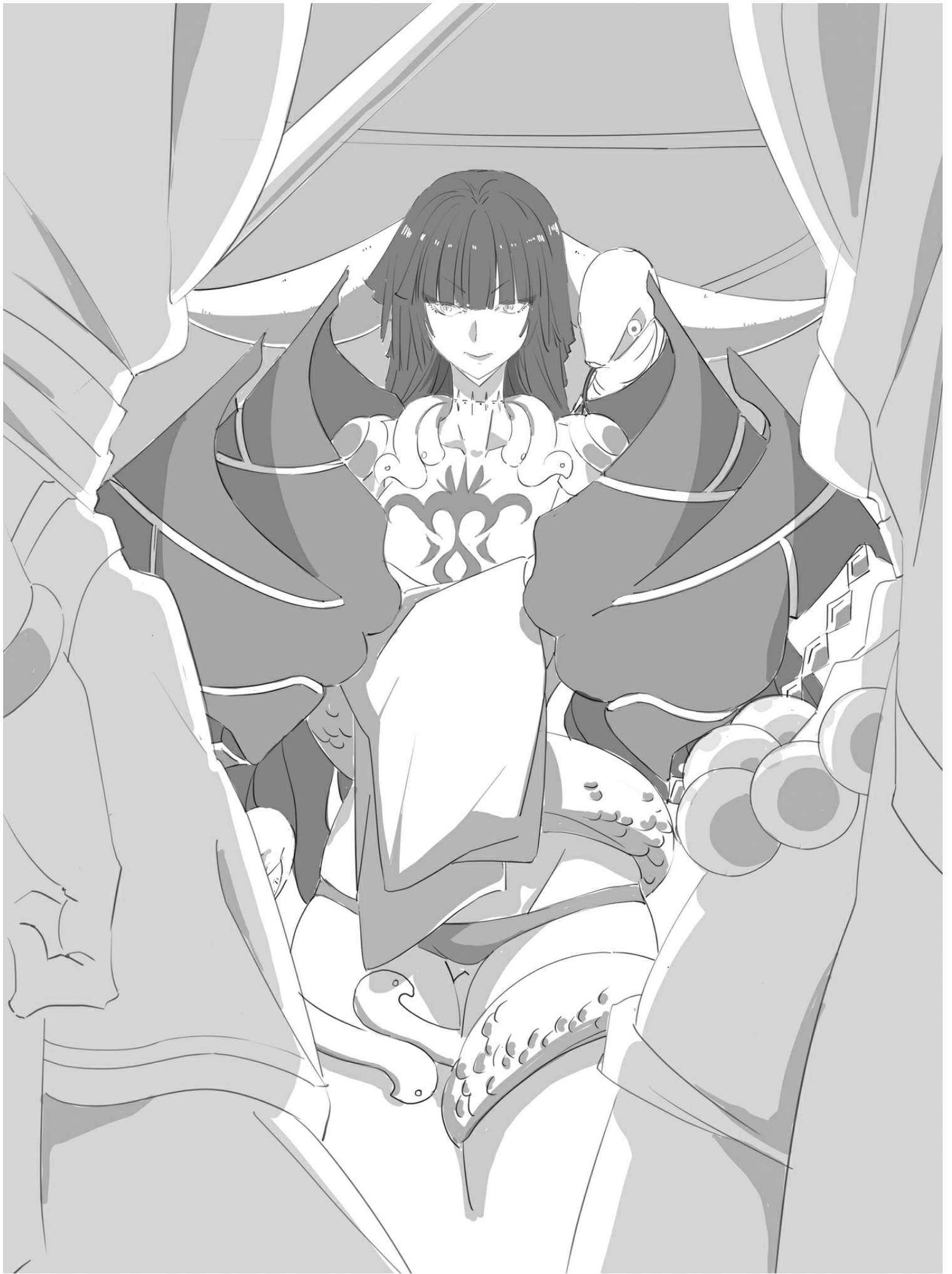
The ape and kappa watched her leave, buckling over from laughter.

“You see the look on the mongrel’s face?!”

“Geh heh heh! I bet this’ll *hound* her for the rest of her life!”

“Drop your stupid grins and shut your stupid mouths, idiots,” an icy voice called from behind them.

Xiaoshou shrank into his shoulders, and Monkey Magic crooked his neck around like a wind-up doll to find the serpent Animadmiral, her hair and eyes the same glacial color. Her gaze seemed able to pierce anything, and she stood with an aura that felt razor sharp. Even her beauty was overpowered by her ice-cold, heartless demeanor.



“M-Miss N-N-N-N-Nagee...” Monkey Magic gulped, facing the serpent without moving a muscle. Even he, the epitome of crass and careless, couldn’t help but freeze before her.

“Shut your stupid mouth, I said.” Her voice was as soul-freezing as one would expect from her aura. A few strands of her glacier hair slithered like snakes, red tongues flickering in and out of their ends. Xiaoshou shrunk himself to wait out the storm, and Monkey Magic simply stood firm as his face grew redder.

“M-Miss N-N-N-N-N-N-Nagee... I—”

“Mouth. Shut. Got it?”

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes, ma’am!”

“Stop the stuttering, it gets on my nerves. Are you stupid? Right, you are. Drop dead,” she spat like she was staring down something unequivocally repulsive. Nagee mostly kept her eyes on the inside of Animania, and was one of the most feared individuals in the country. With rumors about some citizens striking underground deals with humans, her watch had only gotten more scrupulous over time. She set up watch parties all over the territory, highly encouraging its citizens to snitch on each other. Her series of iron-clad laws and moral policing bordered on cruel, rather than strict.

“M-Miss N-N-N-N-Nagee... I-I will forever be—!”

“You are utterly useless from the tip of your head to the bottom of your feet. You are stupidity incarnate.”

Monkey Magic replied with unintelligible sounds.

“That being said...” Nagee added, “That thing on your head could be an exception.” With that, Nagee left without a sound, leaving the pair of them standing there dumbfounded.

Xiaoshou wiped away the beads of sweat that had formed on his dish.

Meanwhile, Monkey Magic seemed to be holding something in, quivering. “D-Did you hear that, Baldy?!”

“I’ve got a good guess as to what you mean, so don’t bother.”

“M-Miss N-N-N-Nagee complimented me!”

“How did you draw *that* conclusion...?” Xiaoshou began walking away, down the hall.

Monkey Magic followed, skipping. “She complimented this! On my head!”

“Did you forget that that’s a curse from the false god?”

“N-N-N-N-Nagee’s eyes! She’s head over heels for me!”

“More like she wants to *kick* your head off...”

“Ooh ah ah! Don’t be jealous of a chick magnet, Baldibald!” the ape cackled, slapping the kappa on the back.

What was the kappa going to do with him? “As fearsome as she may be, she’s got a big flaw...”

“Flaw?! The gorgeous N-N-N-N-Nagee is flawless!”

“She hoards... A bunch of trinkets here and there, all bizarre, stashed away at her place.”

As Xiaoshou had pointed out, Nagee was a bit of a collector. Her trinkets of choice ranged from oddly shaped pebbles, leaves, and perfectly ordinary sea shells, to pieces of jewelry that anyone else in the universe would have found distasteful. In short, anything she fancied was useless or tacky. The *kinkoji* placed on the ape’s head by the Demon Lord, too, was far from fashionable.

“S-Stashed away... N-N-N-N-Nagee will take me home...?”

“Were you listening? I’m telling you, that thing on your head—”

“Ooh ahhhh! This will be the first chapter to the epic *romance* saga that will be my life! First, I have to comb my fur!”

“It’s no use...” Xiaoshou muttered, and started wobbling after Monkey Magic, who restlessly jumped up and down.

There was only one measure the Animadmirals could agree upon: to send the humans trapped in Hellion territory back to the land of the humans as soon as possible. This was by no means an act of kindness, but simply an acknowledgment that humans were unwanted and unwelcome in their borders.

Not only were they useless, but they would get in the way of the Anima. Of course, the fact that the Grand Priestess was involved was a major influence in their decision. If not for her, there would have been no telling the fate of those humans.

——Secret Lair within Animania.

The base stood silent, as if it had been forgotten. No one noticed it or paid it any mind. In fact, even when it came into one's field of vision, it remained just out of view. Furthermore, no sound would escape the base.

"Heh heh heh... Look at those delicious curves..." Cake inched closer to the Shadow Shroom the Demon Lord had found.

"Reeeeeee!" the mushroom shrieked.

Unaffected, Cake wiggled her hands, her eyes gleaming like an emaciated beast. "No one's gonna hear you scream... Give it up and enjoy yourself."

"Reeee!"

"Hah ha ha ha! Cry, bitch! Scream! I'm gonna *devour* you!"

"Reeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Click. An intruder suddenly entered the Lair without so much as a knock on the door. It was the Demon Lord, of course, but looking like he had just come from a duel, so completely different from his previous clothing, face, and even voice.

"Grah?! Who the hell are you?!"

"Reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

The Demon Lord winced at the sudden threat and unintelligible shriek in place of a welcome. "Shut up..." He mourned the loss of the Secret Lair's intended purpose. This was supposed to be a place of rest, where one could spend an elegant time away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Who the hell are you, I said!" Cake demanded, quivering, as she held the knife she took from Hanzel. While she had no combat skills to speak of, she couldn't bear to remain unarmed in the presence of a strange intruder.

“Oh, right. I haven’t changed back...” Black mist rose around the Demon Lord, becoming a flurry of black feathers and scattering all around. The same old Demon Lord she knew was before her when the mystical feather dance settled.

“Wha...? M-Master Demon Lord...?”

“You haven’t gone blind, have you? Anyway, I’m going to take a bath and rest.”

“U-Understood...”

“You should get some rest, too.” He draped his coat on a chair before nearly ripping off his suit jacket, tie, and shirt.

Cake managed to cover her eyes all princess-like, while making sure to get a good peek through her fingers. (This guy’s unreal...! What the hell is his body made of?!)

The Demon Lord’s muscles were chiseled like a statue’s, his body composition resembling that of an apex predator. He seemed to consider Cake a mere child, as he brazenly stripped down to his underwear before heading off to the igloo bath.

The Demon Lord’s body seemed to leave behind a strange sensation that left Cake genuinely blushing. She let out a sigh after he left, letting her shoulders fall.

“A freaking monster... What were those feathers, anyway...? So big... *Everything’s* so big...”

“Reeee... (Agreement) Ree! (Shock)”

Cake stabbed the shroom without another word, skewered it, and placed it over the fire. Then, she began neatly folding the clothes that had just been strewn about. As much as she hated it, she couldn’t help herself. This was one of the aftereffects of being conditioned to serve devils.

The Demon Lord returned from his bath after some time, and wearing an extravagant, crisp-white robe much to Cake’s relief. She wouldn’t know where to look if he had returned in his underwear.

The Demon Lord widened his eyes for a moment as he spotted his clothes

immaculately folded up. “You’re quite nimble-fingered. My clothes clean themselves, but we’ll have to give your clothes a proper launder.”

“N-No thank you! I’ve already washed them in the bath—”

“Just strip them, already. Wear this while you’re here.” The Demon Lord tossed her a smaller bathrobe from the closet, becoming of this space for unwinding. “Throw the clothes you’re wearing in here and press this button.”

“U-Um... What is this?”

“A washing machine. All automatic from tumble to dewrinkle.”

“Y-Yes... Sir? I mean, yes, sir!” Cake answered, although she had no idea what he was talking about.

The washing machine, of course, had been made in the Empire, finished in a style that complemented the interior of the Secret Lair. The shell was wooden, built so the grain blended in with the wall. All it took was ten minutes for it to launder an entire load.

“I’m going to get some rest. Drink this if you get thirsty.” He placed the pail of Fuji Water down on the floor. “But know this: This is divine water, used to accentuate the flavors in dishes and cocktails. It’s a great product, with great health benefits too. Got it?!”

He clearly hadn’t forgotten the item being called cursed water. His tone made it clear that he was adamant in making Cake realize the good in this particular beverage.

“Y-Yes, Sir! Good night!”

The Demon Lord climbed up to the loft and rolled over onto the wooden bed.

Cake dug into the golden-brown Shroom, chomping loudly. (It’s so good... Now this is a delicacy unlike anything I’ve tasted in a long while!) From the moment she put the thing in her mouth, its thick and juicy texture pleasantly burst in her mouth. Even Cake, a former princess, had never tasted a Shadow Shroom before, as it was a delicacy native only to Animania. The soft texture and endless juices stormed the inside of her mouth. It has been said that hunger is the best seasoning, but these fungi would have tasted exquisite even

if the diner was stuffed to the brim. As she chomped the piping Shroom, a brimming smile grew on her face. She couldn't remember the last time she was completely relaxed while eating, without so much as looking around to see who was watching.

Cake scooped a dipper full of the water from the pail and drew it to her dainty lips. The instant the liquid entered her throat, a healing sensation spread all through her body.

"Woah... So good! What is this stuff?!" Cake dropped her princess voice and shouted. What tasted like plain old water was melting away all of her stress in an instant. "Ahh...! That's the stuff!" Cake wiped the droplets off her lips and returned to scarfing down the Shroom. Her dining experience was nothing short of blissful.

The Demon Lord, laying on his back in the loft, couldn't help but let out a chuckle. (That's one heck of a two-face... Not that I have any room to talk.) He, too, had used various aliases and even disguises, after all. Still lying down, the Demon Lord opened the admin screen to reassess his situation. The number that appeared was enough to spread a grin across his face.

Remaining SP: 3078

(That gives me a lot of options...) The number was an accumulation of Belphegor and the remaining monsters that were wiped out when he destroyed the castle. He pulled the bottle of Thunder Water he had strong-armed close to him, gave it a quick swig, and closed his eyes to sink into sleep.

— —Some days later...

The Demon Lord awoke from sensing someone by his bed. He opened his eyes to find Cake peering into his face.

"G-Good morning, Master Demon Lord!"

"Mm..."

"I was worried, you've been sleeping for so long."

"I see. How long has it been?"

“Um, three days...”

He had continued becoming half-awake, taking a swing of Thunder Water, and falling back to sleep the entire time. Most others might have been surprised to hear that they had been sleeping for a few days straight, but the Demon Lord was completely unfazed. After a years-long cycle of working without rest then sleeping like a fuse had blown, he was accustomed to sleeping for days at a time.

“Haven’t had a sleep this good in a while. What a beautiful morning...”

“W-Well... It’s actually nighttime...”

“Night? That calls for a drink.”

“For real...?”

The Demon Lord poured a glass of Thunder Water and downed it, neat. “Deadbeat” seemed like the word best suited for a man who woke up from a days-long slumber just to drink.

“U-Um,” Cake muttered. “Shouldn’t we be on our way...?”

“No, first a bath.”

“For real...?”

The Demon Lord scratched his head as he headed to the igloo bath with his face still groggy.

Cake hadn’t expected him to take a bath first thing, so she rushed to climb down from the loft. “U-Um, well... Sh-Should I rinse your back for you...?”

“No need. Go soak in the cedar tub. Morning baths are just the best.”

“N-No, it’s already nighttime...”

With that, the Demon Lord headed to the igloo bath and produced the bottle of Fire Spirit he had robbed from the dwarf’s place, apparently ready to enjoy another drink with his soak.

After washing himself off, the Demon Lord carried the bucket with the bottle into the bath. “Ahh...” He sighed. “As good a bath as always.” The hot water warmed his entire body, the warmth seeping into his heart. Man’s Fulfillment,

part of the special effect of the bath, filled his being. The bliss of simply soaking in a tub and feeling fulfilled was almost as addicting as hardcore drugs.

The Demon Lord sighed once more. “I have been working too much lately... Everyone needs a holiday after some hard work. And wow, did I work hard. Who else, in any world out there, worked as much as I did?” He poured hot water into the glass, mixing it with the Fire Spirit. Just like a hot toddy, it seemed to magnify the aroma and flavor of the brandy-like spirit. “Hm. This one makes me want to try having it in different drinks. A perfect spirit for a hard worker like me.” Whether it was due to the effects of the igloo bath or not, the Demon Lord looked perfectly proud and accomplished.

The ‘work’ this man had done recently was beat a devil named Hanzel to a pulp, shoot off a random assortment of fireworks in Hellion territory, stomp Belphegor into a stain on the floor, and blow a castle to smithereens. ‘God of Destruction’ might have been a better description than ‘hard worker.’ Combined with his current state, he might as well have been called the ‘Deadbeat God of Destruction,’ which was quite the unusual title.

“I guess I’ll give Olgan a call...” He happily sipped his glass of Fire Spirit and shot a Communication to Olgan.

She responded quickly, apparently acclimated to the process.

It’s me. Catch me up, the Demon Lord said.

I’m in Fort Arthur on the border. I’ve heard that the city of Rookie’s in hot water, thanks to you.

Me? What did I do?

You had Mynk take the captives from Stage One there. Apparently the government and the Hero have their hands full with them.

The Demon Lord almost pointed out that Akane was the one who gave the direction, but reconsidered. The boss was responsible for his employees’ actions, after all. Besides, he had requested that they send the captives from Stage Two and Three to Rookie as well.

Most of the enslaved have no family, Olgan added. *Let alone a place to go.*

I see... The Demon Lord only said that he would contact her again soon, and ended the Communication. He wasn't in the mood to overthink things in his blissful bath. (The pieces will fall where they're supposed to... Of course they will. When have they not?! Hah ha!) Filled with the manly sense of fulfillment, the Demon Lord drank more of the Fire Spirit with a vague feeling of having solved the problem without really solving it.

(I guess I should get a report from Tahara too...) He sent a Communication.

Hey-ho, Tahara cheerfully answered, as if he had been itching for a call. *I've been waiting for a com from you, Mister Secretary.*

Any good news?

Tahara went on to report in detail the current state of the village of Rabbi and recent events like the mending of Harts and the Madam's friendship. The Demon Lord simply nodded along, but let out a sigh of relief at the financial state of the village.

Everything's fitting into this picture you've painted, it's a pleasure to watch. Before I know it, high society and the military nobles are waltzing hand-in-hand.

I have no idea what you're talking about... The Demon Lord answered with gravitas. The problem was that he really did have no idea. The peace brokered between the two factions was a political progression much more significant than he realized. In other words, the finances of Holylight just became tied to its military, and the power balance of the nation had drastically shifted overnight. While Luna was the one who mediated the peace deal on paper, there was more under the surface. Both parties, as well as Luna, were greatly indebted to the Demon Lord, and their relationship would not stand without him. Tahara couldn't help but be impressed by how well the Demon Lord pulled the strings from behind the curtains.

Putting the Holy Maiden in the spotlight and making sure the moneybags shake hands with the military. I couldn't pull off something like that if I tried.

Just your imagination... *I haven't done anything*, he responded with a twinge of nervousness. He truly hadn't done anything. Regardless of Harts' or the Madam's thoughts, their peacemaking happened while he was away. He was as confused as he could be. He had been lapped so many times that it now

seemed like he was ahead of the race.

Hah ha ha! True, as far as the rest of the world is concerned, you haven't done a thing. But it makes things easier for me if you stick to pulling strings from the shadows.

(*You're the one pulling strings!*) The Demon Lord nearly shouted, but kept it to himself by dunking his head in the water. No matter what happened, he seemed to be credited for it.

Anyway, he Communicated, *I have news for you...* The Demon Lord told Tahara what had happened in Hellion territory in a vague way to avoid any questions.

Hellion territory, huh... Knowing you, you're moving steps and steps ahead of us. You even called Akane in. Meanwhile, I've got my hands full with the tasks in front of me.

The Demon Lord sighed in relief at Tahara's reaction, seeing that he wouldn't be asked too many questions on the matter. Of course, Tahara had purposefully decided to keep his distance, certain of one thing. Whenever Akane was involved, some important figure would turn up dead 'by accident,' according to her backstory.

Well, Tahara went on, I'll leave anything with Akane involved to you. But I've got an ongoing issue over here...

Issue?

Might have mentioned it before, but we're shorthanded, Tahara bitterly said.

He had called for workers from various guilds through Luna, but the village had been suffering from a continuous shortage of them. Luna was infamous for her temper, and not many workers were eager to go work in a village of demi-humans. Of course, rumors of 'the Demon Lord' contributed to deterring them.

(Shorthanded...) This was an issue the Demon Lord was quite familiar with. Many nations on Earth were experiencing a decline in birth rates, causing existing social programs to crumble. The issue reached farther than a shortage of workers, also affecting programs like social security, causing a rise in medical costs, etc. Even in 2016, Japan had not found a clue as to how to solve the issue.

The Japanese government at the time, as if to slap a bandage on the wound, had passed a motion to increase immigration and bring in workers from overseas. (Before I knew it, I was expecting every retail and restaurant worker to be a foreigner...) While bringing in laborers from other nations might have stopped the bleeding, it didn't solve the underlying issue. After all, the only way to encourage confidence in people to procreate was to enrich the nation from the ground up.

With that in mind, the Demon Lord decided to make a vague suggestion with as much gravitas as he could muster. *For the time being, we may have to import them...* Just like a politician without any forethought, the Demon Lord was trying to slap a bandage on the wound and hand off the responsibility.

Import, huh? Any leads as to where from?

Leads... Of course. Simple.

For real?! Send 'em over as soon as you can! Without enough people, we're not getting through construction as fast as I want.

A light bulb had flashed bright above his head... the people rescued from the Slave Market. They might serve as a bandage over the wound.

I'll follow up on that, the Demon Lord answered.

Alrighty, then! You can leave the rest to me!

The Demon Lord rushed to end the Communication and sent another to Olgan.

After telling her to send the destitute former slaves to the village of Rabbi, he let out a long sigh. (Guess I... took care of it? Yes, I did. Of course, I did. Gah ha ha!) His serious contemplation didn't last long, as he was filled with groundless glee from the manufactured sense of fulfillment. At this rate, the igloo bath might reduce him to a dysfunctional bum.

"U-Um, Master Demon Lord..."

"Hm? What's the matter?" He turned to Cake, standing in the courtyard, fidgeting. After her thorough conditioning to serve those devils, she didn't seem to know how to handle herself without any tasks on her plate.

Besides, she had to ensnare this man's heart for her own sake. "Are you sure... I shouldn't be doing anything...?"

"Don't worry about it. You're still just a br... kid." The Demon Lord held up his glass of Fire Spirit to the sky and tossed it back. It was a confident gesture, but he was just a dude drinking in a bathtub.

"W-With such luxury, and especially after such time... I feel like, um, I'll be punished for it..."

The Demon Lord laughed. "Punished by who, the divine? If anyone deserves to be punished for their deeds, especially in the eyes of a *god*, it's me," the Demon Lord humbly declared, only because he believed in no concept of a higher being. Even if one did exist, he would try to defeat them head-on if they tried to stand in his way. In that sense, he was worthy of the monikers of Demon Lord and Lucifer.

"M-Master Demon Lord... May I join you in the tub...?" Cake attempted to charm the man.

"As if. You trying to jailbait me?" He only saw Cake as a child and nothing more. As with other things, he drew a hard line and never wavered on it.

Cake tightened her fists. Without influencing him, she had no hope of taking down the powerful New Kingdom of Xenobia. "I...want to retake my country."

"What are you talking about?" The Demon Lord gazed upward, taking another swig of the Fire Spirit. The clear sky was dotted with stars that seemed to compete with each other in brightness, making for a grandiose sight.

Cake let tears roll down her cheeks, trying another angle, but the Demon Lord remained unmoved. While he might have seemed coldhearted, he was simply too buzzed to notice.

"To free my country from Xenobia... Please lend me your strength, Master Demon Lord!"

(The rain stopped. What a beautiful night sky... And a good drink to top it off.)

"Once they know I'm alive, there will be old allies who will stand up to Xenobia's regime...!"

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord hummed along and downed the rest of the glass of Fire Spirit. Such cruel ignorance to the girl tearfully pleading for his aid.

“You’re the only one I can believe in, Master Demon Lord...!”

“Faith makes you blind... Just watch your step instead,” he proudly remarked, and closed his eyes.

Cake felt the urge to crack the Demon Lord’s head open, but she knew she didn’t stand a chance against him with brute force.

“I’ve been hearing much of that nation lately. I’ll stop by for a visit soon.”

Cake’s eyes gleamed at the Demon Lord’s remark, which he had made without much thought. At the same time, she let her bathrobe fall. “When I retake my nation, I shall pledge its fealty to you. And...also my own. My body is yours.”

The Demon Lord finally wore a straight face. He barely knew anything about the Northern Nations, save for their continuous and seasonal warfare. “I don’t know what you’re brooding about,” he said, “but relax in the bath for a bit.”

“Wha...?”

The Demon Lord strode from the igloo bath and grabbed Cake by the shoulders before plopping her in the tub. She cast him a dirty look at his apparent lack of interest in her.

“I will only act on my own accord,” he declared. “If what you want is in line with what I want, I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.” The Demon Lord walked out.

He continued lazing around for some time, justifying it to himself as a ‘vacation’ before finally getting to work again. Right now, he, more than Belphegor ever was, was the embodiment of Sloth.

No Way Out

—Dona's Manor, Holylight.

The shock wave that resulted from the two factions making peace had spread throughout the continent. While they suffered no direct loss from the event, Dona's noble faction was most threatened by this result, considering their standing. The previously unparalleled force (at least in Holylight) had suffered a depression in morale as of late.

"Ha-rumph... Above all, ha-rumph, I say!" Dona's fat jiggled as he tossed a piece of steak into his mouth. Unpleasant reports were piling up, without a single viable countermove for him to make. He had lost contact with the mad-dog Milligan, the Madam had proudly sent her caravan up north, and Dona had lost an auction to the Madam's sister. Worse still, the Demon Lord had now made a great name for himself in the North. All of this bad news was almost unbearable.

"Azur!" he shouted. "What *were* you doing in the north?! You couldn't even stop one lousy maniac who claims to be the Demon Lord?!"

"A thousand apologies, My Lord. He is beyond my control." Azur was telling the truth, so he bowed deep in apology. The more he thought about the battle he had witnessed, the less human its participants seemed.

The clash between the Tzardom and the Satanists had half-destroyed the capital of Suneo. They had each used their trump cards, as the Tzardom sent in their Temple Knights and Elemental Knights, matched by the Satanists' Entranced and Haunts. That much, however, could have been explained as merely acts of war.

"My Lord, not only were there Tzardom troops, but a mock angel and a devil I have never seen before—"

"Silence! How dare you blame the likes of *angels and devils* for your incompetence?!" Angels and devils were something detached from Dona's life.

A mere concept to him. He simply took advantage of the fact that his far distant ancestors had stood against the king of devils alongside the Wise Angel. Deep down, he held no faith for any deity.

“But Lady Luna defeated the—”

Dona scoffed. “Number Three has some talent in magic. The least she can do to justify her position is take down a Hellion or two.”

In this world, the word ‘Hellion’ was an umbrella term that encompassed any creature from devils and Firebrands to monsters, Haunts, Hellbeasts, *etc.* Dona only had knowledge of low-ranking Hellions, which were a far cry from the Ancient Devil that called itself Behemoth. Left alone, it would have easily taken out an entire nation or two, let alone all that remained of the city. That being said, as Dona wasn’t there to witness it firsthand, Azur could say nothing to change his mind. At the end of the day, those who have never experienced an earthquake do not understand the severity of one, nor do they grasp the horrors of a plague regardless of how much history textbooks tell of the Spanish flu and Black Death.

Dona’s attitude was less from ignorant optimism, but more from a sense of arrogance. He disregarded the unknown and felt entitled to the known. “What is Milligan doing, anyway?!” he shrieked. “Why won’t he send a single report?!”

Azur’s expression darkened. “*Why?*” He was dead or captured, of course. Furthermore, Azur expected a mercenary as notorious as Milligan to have prepared men reserved for communications. No news at all, in this case, meant that his entire team was taken out.

Azur attempted to convey the fact to his master, as plainly as possible. “Killed or captured, most likely. In fact, we must prepare for—”

“Ridiculous! How much do you think I’ve put into him?! He’s a far cry from getting me my money’s worth!”

“If he’s dead, we may be able to feign ignorance... We’ll need another plan if he’s kept alive.”

“Hmph! Who cares about a useless mercenary? I’ll simply deny ever knowing the man!” Dona threw another chunk of steak into his mouth.

In fact, a man of Dona's status could shut most nobles up with a simple denial. However, he had sent Milligan to the village of Rabbi, run by one of the Holy Maidens, Luna. If things escalated, even White was sure to make an appearance.

"Knowing how much Lady White cares for her sisters, she may come after us."

Dona groaned, pausing his chewing. He considered White his one and only weakness, and intended to take her as his wife one day. He wanted to avoid losing her favor at all cost. His childish sentiment, of course, would not be reciprocated.

"No matter. I simply need to *take* my wife. That'll keep her from spewing nonsense. Azur, bring in Five and Forty-One. I need something to take my mind off of things."

"My Lord, if you truly intend to wed Lady White, consider freeing those girls. If she ever discovers that—"

"Silence! You dare defy me?!" Dona smashed the plate, wet with steak blood, into Azur's face.

Azur bowed without another word. This sort of interaction was a common occurrence in the manor, even though Azur had simply made what he considered a bare minimum suggestion to his master, whom he felt he owed for giving him a stable life after a life on the run.

Shrimp, Dona's nephew, waltzed into the dreary room, his attire glitzy enough to change the air at once. Shrimp gave a glance at Azur's state and noted the air in the room, but said nothing of it. He simply pointed to his own face and drew a line with his finger, gesturing for Azur to clean himself off.

"Uncle. I have good news from a trustworthy source."

"Good news? It's a long time coming after a slew of unpleasant reports. Go on."

"The militaristic nobles of the north and the high society of Central have joined forces..."

Dona froze for a moment before beginning to shake. Azur kept his chin down

as he wiped his face, but he was giving a piercing look to Shrimp.

“What?! How could that possibly...?! And what part of *that* is good news?!” He stood from his seat, incredulous.

Shrimp, on the other hand, spread his arms wide in celebration. “What is it but a declaration of war against us? We finally have the excuse we’ve been looking for to rid the country of them.”

“Wait... If they’ve joined forces...”

“They’re desperate, seeing how you’ve expanded our legion, Uncle.” Shrimp was technically correct that neither Madam nor Harts had enough manpower to take on Dona’s faction alone. The best they could manage was to maintain the status quo.

“Hrm...” Dona grunted. “Their forces are separated, north and south. Are you suggesting I should take them out one by one?”

Shrimp graciously nodded. “Dear, brave Uncle. Taking them on in the field would be one thing, but have you a plan to siege Gatekeeper?”

“Wha...?! N-No, if they lock themselves in that fortress... It won’t be...so easy.” Dona awkwardly reached for his glass of wine. If Azur had asked the same question, he would have thrown his steak knife at his face.

“And High Society is simply an organization of ladies without swords. We can hardly march into one of their balls and massacre them.”

“You think I haven’t thought of that?!”

“Such a barbaric act would spell doom for our reputation. All nobles would drink to the savagery of Dona Dona.”

The Madam and Harts were equally as troublesome to Dona as he was to them. It was nearly impossible to take the fortress in the north, and the ladies of Central were on a different battlefield altogether. As Luna might agree, elegance and decorum were expected of nobles. None would follow a noble who resorted to brute force. On the flip side, any heinous act could be accepted in noble society with a little touch of elegance.

“Get to the point!” Dona demanded. “What are you telling me to do,

Shrimp?!”

“With a declaration to defeat our faction, they have no choice but to attack. They can’t simply stand back after throwing their gloves to the ground in such a theatrical fashion.”

Dona nodded in agreement. “Indeed. Without their fortress, the northerners are nothing but a swarm of poor meatheads. But what if they stay put in their nest, forsaking what little pride they have now?”

“We simply eliminate their choices until they’re *forced* to attack, Uncle. For instance, we can limit the number of Water Spell Stones we put out in the market, raising prices and slowly suffocating them.”

“Grah hah hah! Starve the beast out, you say!”

Starving a beast, then striking it as it emerges from its lair weakened. It was a very *noble* method of hunt indeed. Whether the civilians who would be caught in the crossfire would see it that way was another story.

“Uncle. This calls for urgent and major renovations of our fortress, the Wise Angelic Gatekeeper.”

“Indeed. A grand fortress worthy of our cause is in order if we are to call the majority of nobles to our aid. We shall show those beasts how nobles conduct themselves on the battlefield!”

Dona’s faction naturally possessed their own fortress, which had only served ceremonial purposes until now. Now he planned to renovate the structure for actual battle. Dona imagined the tens of thousands of nobles flocking to his feet to receive his command. He chuckled, shaking his gut.

“One more thing, Uncle. It may be best to gather as many swords as you can...for a rainy day.”

“Who needs outsiders? There’ll be forty to fifty thousand strong, ready to fight at my command.”

“Let the beasts hunt each other. What merit is there in you cutting down the beast yourself, Uncle? Your mercy may become your undoing.” Shrimp chuckled. He had implied that Dona lacked the aforementioned decorum in his

plan.

Dona had no words to retort. “You certainly speak your mind, Nephew... What are these ‘swords’ you speak of?”

“Xenobia and the Tzardom come to mind... They seemed to have a chip on their shoulder.”

“Interesting... Go on.”

After the meeting of Dona and Shrimp, Azur silently stepped out into the hallway.

Shrimp called to him, “What are your thoughts on these changes, Azur?”

“I lack the wisdom to offer, My Lord.”

Azur addressed Shrimp as such, as he would be the one to follow in Dona’s footsteps. Each time, Shrimp’s cheeks would ever so slightly redden. Another survival tactic of Azur’s.

“Still water runs deep... And you’re as still as they get,” said Shrimp.

“Certainly you jest.” Azur deeply bowed, as if to avoid the inquisitive glare.

Shrimp regarded Azur highly, but made sure to keep an eye on him at the same time. “I have a philosophy to use any and all tools at my disposal. Xenobia, the Tzardom, mercenaries, even Satanists... And even you, Azur.”

“I doubt I may ever be so useful to you.”

Shrimp patted Azur on the shoulder and whispered, “If we win this war, Holylight will be a glorious land ruled by our kind for a thousand years. If ever you find any seed of treachery in your mind, stomp it out.”

These changes reached beyond Holylight and into its neighboring nations.

—Kongming’s Room, the New Kingdom of Xenobia.

“How...could this have happened...?!” Kongming’s face was losing color by the second as she heard Hanzo’s report. She had aimed to create a divide in the long-standing peace between the Tzardom of Light and Holylight. In that sense,

she had greatly succeeded. On the other hand, there were far more unforeseen events than she expected. “Why did the Satanists...? Why would they go to such extreme lengths in a foreign nation...?”

While the Satanists were active within Holylight, their actions in foreign nations had been limited to seeking donations or followers to strengthen their ranks. They called for helping the meek and for the redistribution of wealth, and called out the abuse of power. All of which were pleasant tunes to the ears of an average citizen. Many had donated money to the organization, tired of the endless warfare in the north. Now, they had summoned Haunts and devils in the middle of a foreign capital.

Kongming groaned at the inconsistency. “It’s like they’re *trying* to throw away all of the goodwill they’ve earned...!” At the same time, Kongming had one answer in mind. They didn’t mind throwing it all away. That wasn’t an easy decision to comprehend, however. They had destroyed everything they had built up through their grassroots efforts.

(Even the chancellor is shaken up by this one...) Hanzo continued her report, waiting for Kongming’s thoughts to settle. Her wisdom was what had elevated Xenobia to the Ruler of the North, after all. “...The Tzardom countered the devil with a mock angel, before the devil was finally defeated by Luna Elegant of Holylight.”

“What a timeline...”

Somewhere in the middle were the Entranced and the Haunted clashing with the Elemental Knights. Ordinarily, turning a foreign capital into a battleground would have been a grave war crime.

Kongming recalled how cutthroat the career ladder was within the Tzardom, and felt a certain level of understanding towards the bishop’s decision. “He must have feared turning it into a City of Death. I still had uses for that bishop, too...” It was regrettable, considering how well the bishop served to rot the Tzardom from within and drive the Hero’s heart away from his homeland.

“He seems to have been taken to Holylight.”

“I wonder what they’ll do with him... No matter how much they make him talk, the Tzardom will make sure he *never existed*. Or simply call him bedeviled.”

‘Bedeviled’ was a term that described those possessed by a devil. Like witches in Salem, the bedeviled were rounded up and executed. At times, the accusation was used to take care of deviants. A bishop privy to the secrets of the Tzardom was more likely to be treated like a devil himself.

“Forgive me, Chancellor, but I doubt Holylight will accept the usual spiel.”

“The Tzardom will stick to it, no matter how bold of a lie it is. They always know when to control the food supply or flash their blade.”

In fact, the Tzardom of Light had always pushed through any diplomatic issue with two tools: intimidation and enticement. Many of the smaller Northern Nations were rendered powerless, manipulated by the monetary and moral enticement of the Tzardom.

However, Hanzo had witnessed something that had blown away all of her preconceptions on the power dynamic of this world. “The man who calls himself the Demon Lord, and who I assume to be his right-hand man, ‘Tahara,’ are both beyond our frame of understanding. They would scoff at any poor excuse the Tzardom can come up with.”

“You said they destroyed a mock angel, right? It’s hard to believe, but...”

“Using the bishop, they were poised to wage war against the Tzardom at all cost.”

“War?! Don’t be ridiculous... They haven’t even taken over a single region in their country. If we just take a step back, they only have a village full of demi-humans.”

“If you recall my previous report, the militaristic and high society nobles in Holylight have joined forces.”

Kongming’s expression clouded. It was an eerie report, indeed. She would have expected Hellion territory to freeze over before the infamously adversarial Harts and Madam made peace. Who else but the ‘Demon Lord’ could have made it happen? She could see how much Holylight had changed since the man’s appearance... Personally, she would have preferred the nation in its fractured, directionless state.

“The Demon Lord...” she muttered. “Must be a cunning strategist.”

Anyone else would have made the same assessment as Kongming. From the perspective of a foreign nation looking in, the Demon Lord had performed some dark magic to make Harts and the Madam shake hands.

“He mentioned that he would ‘swing by’ our nation.”

“Some gall...!” Kongming growled.

Xenobia had grown too large in too short of a time. At the moment, the country was like a lion catching its breath. They were in a situation where they wanted to let their expansions settle and enrich what they already had. Geographically, there was significant landmass between Xenobia and Holylight, which should prevent an all-out war between the nations, but the Demon Lord was outside of that equation. If he could take out a mock angel on his own, Kongming could easily imagine him infiltrating their capital and single-handedly reducing it to rubble. Seeing that the capital of Suneo had suffered a similar fate, her fear was entirely rational.

“We can’t let him near our country...” Kongming decided, and began floating countless ideas in her mind.

Hanzo asked, as she always did, “What shall we do?”

“It’s too risky to face him head-on. We’ll make Euritheis our camp, first.”

“Euritheis...? Ah, Mad Dog Jack.”

“Yes. He must be losing his mind without the treasure trove that was the bishop.” Kongming imagined the knave with whom the bishop preferred to trade. Their merchandise ranged from the drug Trance, to slaves, weapons, illegal imports... Considering how many ongoing illegal and profitable trades Jack had with the bishop, Kongming expected him to be thoroughly outraged. As she had a knack for taking advantage of the anger and suspicion of others, more and more strategies materialized in Kongming’s brain. “At the same time, we’ll keep them busy in Holylight. Let’s bolster the nobles that oppose him so they can buy us some time... Nothing could be better than resolving this situation all within Holylight.”

“I believe it will be next to impossible to take him by force,” Hanzo said bluntly. After seeing the Demon Lord in action, she would consider it suicide to

engage in combat with *that*.

“I’ll put Leon on it this time.”

“The general...?!” Just as Hanzo muttered in shock, one of Hanzo’s subordinates entered with a pigeon and handed it over. She slowly unraveled the paper tied to its leg. “A Holylight noble has approached us. They request a meeting with you, Chancellor.”

“Perfect timing.”

Kongming spread her fan and snickered, seeing how well things were coming together.

Dubious intentions surrounding the Demon Lord were now reaching the Tzardom of Light in the far west.



—The Tzardom Light, Western Nations.

The Tzardom was a giant nation, its population far exceeding 20 million. While Holylight was a theocracy that worshiped the angels and their teachings, the Tzardom of Light worshiped the Great Light, said to have led those angels.

Their system of government was rather archaic. Old and powerful families each held their own farm workers as laborers, which were raised without decent education. Perhaps they feared some sort of rebellion if the laborers were taught how to think. This age-old system bound children by birth, ensuring that lines of laborers would forever remain in their role. Those families, who held the vast farmland and numerous laborers, selected the pope, the leader of their nation. Despite his title, the pope had always been the epitome of avarice, which left the country hopeless for any change to their system.

While such systems often declined and fell throughout history, like in the Russian Empire, the Tzardom of Light possessed unparalleled advantages.

The first of which was its land. Blessed by the Great Light, the Tzardom's soil produced unbelievably bountiful crops. Their national yield easily doubled or tripled that of neighboring nations, allowing them to pay the farm workers barely enough to live. Year after year of endless war and food production had garnered great wealth for the Tzardom. In fact, they had enough resources to fuel the entire Northern Nations region throughout its wars.

The second was the existence of the Paladins. They could each fight an army on their own. The Tzardom held two Ancient Fragments, said to have been left by the Great Light, and those chosen by the Fragments were tasked with becoming the face and sword of the Tzardom as Paladins. With its land and military blessed by the Light, the Tzardom was one of the superpowers of the continent.

However, day after day, unpleasant reports reached the glorious and prosperous Tzardom of Light.

"Your Holiness. There is a messenger from Suneo requesting a public statement and compensation for *the incident*."

"Nonsense... A nation as insignificant as a leaf in the breeze."

The current pope was 47, but looked much younger, perhaps thanks to his habit of drinking bottles of Spirit Cure (which would have cost the average citizen an arm and a leg for a single one) as well as burning with endless ambition. He seemed more like a venture capitalist ready to fulfill his every worldly desire.

“That being said, they are one of the wealthiest nations in the north. If we keep them talking...”

“It might hurt business,” the pope snarled, unbecoming of his holiness.

“The king of the nation is a masterful diplomat,” the temple master continued. “It may prove cumbersome to have him whisper this and that in the ears of foreign rulers.”

Annoyed, the pope reached for a piece of fruit from the stack beside him. Suneo was a strange nation where its entirety, including its king, was entrenched in business. The king directed refining national goods, while they were always importing materials to develop into branded products. Their widespread obsession with luxury items seemed unending, from jewelry, dresses, perfume, and cosmetics to things like dishware and silverware. One would find it difficult to find a luxury item not handled by the brand conglomerate that was Suneo.

This made Suneo a little bit of a nuisance for the pope. “An annoying little country. A little too much change in their pocket...”

When it came to business, Suneo still stood no chance against the Tzardom, which exported an abundance of food. They also had a different customer base than Suneo’s limited release of luxury items.

“Your Holiness, they have managed to effectively lend their pocket change to their neighboring nations.”

“Hmph. Those clever rats...”

Suneo’s foreign relation policy could be summed up as ‘money talks.’ Most Northern Nations were impoverished by long-lasting wars. Suneo often swept in with a loan and a smile, virtuously putting the borrowing nation under their control. Whenever international problems arose, they utilized their borrower

nations as intermediaries or bodyguards. Although they were a small nation, Suneo knew how to stretch their money.

“As frustrating as it may be, we may have to hand over some cash,” the Temple Master added.

“All because of that fool...” The pope spat out the pit of the fruit that he was eating, recalling the smirk of the bishop, smothered with greed. The pope had known the bishop’s dealings with the underworld, and had taken advantage of him with that in mind. Now the pope was quick to cut him off. “He was bedeviled. Relay the message.”

“Your Holiness...”

“We have also lost soldiers. I won’t stand for this pretense that they alone were the victims in this attack. Allowing such a miniscule nation to *extort* us will besmirch the name of the Light.” Then, the pope dramatically added, “That being said, tell them that the Light will bestow their people with securities for pity of the civilians who have fallen.”

“Excellent, Your Holiness. I will have the temple and Suneo have mercy upon their people.”

“Very well. Throw some food scraps in with it. Sprinkle the mob with some mercy.”

“Understood!”

As a result, they would not pay any reparations to the government of Suneo, but garner the goodwill of their people. The pope knew how to make lemonade when he was handed lemons.

“Speaking of mercy, *he* has been bombarding us with requests...”

“The imbecile... Tell him to return to his homeland at once!” The pope shouted with audible irritation, vividly imagining the face of the pesky Hero. He saw the hero as someone who defied his authority as the voice of the Light, and rarely obeyed his orders. What’s more, the hero had the gall to always give him a cold, sideways glance filled with disrespect and contempt.

“I have... Many times before...”

“Still trying to save the poor?! Hmph! When will he wake up?!”

“In a way, he is more troublesome than our enemies.”

“‘Think of all humankind...!’ Pah! A fool’s rambling. He refuses to see reality. Nor politics, nor the balance of the continent, nor anything substantial for that matter. He lives in a pipe dream!”

The Temple Master shared the people’s sentiment. War continued even in the west where the Tzardom was located. The people considered it laughable that the Hero seemed to turn a blind eye to this and was undertaking the impossible task of ‘saving the poor.’ Of course, that may have been the very quality that made him a Hero.

“There is also a messenger from Holylight, Your Holiness.”

“Holylight... Well.” The pope’s expression twisted.

The Tzardom and Holylight had a long-lasting friendship as nations that worship the Light and Angels, respectively. While their relationship had been mostly in name, the pope wanted to avoid rocking that boat, if only to keep from giving any ammunition to those scheming for his position.

“Lady White is as steadfast as always... Although her beauty has been wasted in a second-class nation...” The pope had met White before in a diplomatic scenario. At the time, he was a seasoned politician while White was a young girl newly selected as Holy Maiden.

“Actually, Your Holiness, it seems the messenger is from the third Maiden.”

“Hm? The girl who defeated a devil?” The frown faded from the pope’s brow. This wasn’t a conscious shift, but a natural display of underestimation.

“It appears she has suffered severe injuries from the summoned angel, along with a military officer...”

“She expects us to take responsibility for the malfunction of an angel...? I wonder if Lady White takes the training of her sisters seriously.” The pope let out a sigh, thinking of Queen.

He truly saw Holylight as a second-rate nation, where the Holy Maidens were all troublemakers, the entire nation was divided into feuding factions, and the

people devolved into Satanism. As someone who saw Holylight as a sort of crazy uncle, the ship had sailed long ago for the pope to ever respect them.

“Your Holiness, her request seems... *extreme*. I asked the messenger to repeat it, thinking that I was mishearing...”

“How do you mean, ‘extreme’?”

“She demands a direct apology and explanation from Your Holiness...”

“Outrageous! What does that second-rate country think it is?!” The pope grumbled at the message from the *third* Holy Maiden of an inferior nation.

In truth, the messenger was sent by Tahara unbeknownst to Luna. He hadn’t done so with any particular scheme in mind, but simply to criticize what he thought was wrong and set a precedent.

The pope, unaware of that, quivered at the unexpected insult. “Foolish girl... Who does she think she is...?!”

Then, another report came in. Whether the timing was good or bad was yet to be seen.

“This is from the noble faction of Holylight,” a bishop explained. “A letter from sir Shrimp...”

“That youngblood. Go on.”

“He requests aid to eliminate Satanists and other threats within Holylight.”

“Oh...?” The pope read the letter, and a grin spread across his face. He could see that the Satanists were merely an excuse for another goal. “It seems he wants to unite the country.”

“It seems about time... Acting as swiftly as an old man waking from a nap.”

“Hmph. A perfect excuse. Let us break their sense of entitlement.”

“And for our return, Your Holiness?” the Temple Master asked with a nasty grin.

The pope wore a similar expression. There were no signs of valor or camaraderie, only the smelling of money.

“Lord Dona’s land is rich with Water Spell Stones...” the pope declared, as if

speaking about mountains of gold.

The Temple Master's grin grew wider. Spell Stones were practically a money tree in this world. "Now this is a very favorable deal—*mission*, I must say."

"Indeed. The extermination of those devil worshipers is an important mission to the Light. We mustn't turn them away." With that, the pope finally burst out laughing, and the Temple Master joined in. It was as if they only had to mow the lawn to receive a load of funds.

After a fit of laughter, the Temple Master decided to disclose his remaining concern. Naturally, it was about the man who called himself the Demon Lord. The report stated that he had obliterated the summoned angel to pieces.

"About the man who calls himself the Demon Lord..."

"If half of the rumors are true, he seems a nuisance. He may be a Firebrand."

"According to the report, the angel had suffered a grave injury in its fight against the devil..."

"Naturally. That is not something a human can take on. That being said, we mustn't let our guard down." The pope rang a bell, summoning numerous serving women. Each of them held a silver tray topped with luxuries like fine wine, fruits, and meats. "After we rest, let us select a troop to deploy."

"Yes, Your Holiness!" The Temple Master turned to the women. "What are you doing with your clothes on?! His Holiness has much to worry about, ease his mind!"

In the Grand Citadel in the City of Light, another feast and much debauchery continued, devoid of any semblance of holiness. Their lascivious prosperity would continue the next day and into the next, until the day when the Demon Lord arrived in this land.

Tzardom of Light – Hierarchy

The Divine Academy

A school reserved for those with especially strong affinities for the Light and Holy elements. Rumor has it that students are also accepted out of family influence, connections, or good old fashioned bribery. Only a select few students graduate to become Clergymen.

The Military Academy

An institution more accepting than the Divine Academy. Many farmers' sons confident in their muscle or sword make the pilgrimage each year, seeking out one of the only ways in the Tzardom to improve their circumstances. However, a vast majority of them are rejected, sent back to their villages and their predetermined fates. Those accepted begin training to become Temple Knights.

Clergymen

A title granted to the graduates of the Divine Academy. Clergymen are afforded absolute power in the Tzardom, along with a lifetime of comfort and luxury.

Military Leaders

A position given to those who excel in the Military Academy. That being said, they are of a relatively low status in the Tzardom and are not generally expected to climb the career ladder.

Priest

A leader of several clergymen. They are practically nobles to ordinary citizens of the Tzardom.

Commander

The leader of a platoon, but more like an errand boy to a Priest.

Bishop

A powerful leader with several Priests and Military Leaders under their command. They presume themselves on equal standing with foreign royalty and nobility.

Grand Commander

The greatest rank those of ordinary birth can achieve in the Tzardom. Only those of truly exceptional talent are able to progress beyond this level.

Temple Master

Keepers of the Temples of Light built throughout foreign nations. They have the power to act absolutely within their temples. They have a direct line to the Pope, giving them a stature above the rest of the Church.

General

Leader of the Temple Knights' Order. They are skilled in leadership on top of being exceptional fighters.

Rector→Friar→Archbishop→Cardinal

Elite Clergymen revered by the population. As only the true servants of the Light climb to these positions, they are above all political influence.

Elemental Knights' Order

Comprised of those with strong affinities for the elements of Fire, Water, Wind, and Earth. They garner respect from both inside and outside of the Tzardom on another level than the Clergymen do.

Paladins

The ultimate weapons and pride of the Tzardom. Those chosen by the Holy Garb Box and the Forbidden Flame assume this role. They are akin to weapons of mass destruction.

The Pope

The pinnacle of the Tzardom, selected from the countless old families in the country. The closest being to the Great Light and considered its voice in the realm. While his power is unquestioned, the collective opinion of those old families has an influence on him.

The Paladin's Woe

—Congressional Meeting, the Republic of Edogawa.

Edogawa was a rare example of a republic among nations of royal rule. Of course, they were far from the more modern iteration which held national elections and gave all of its citizens a vote. The Republic of Edogawa was run by those dubbed “the Noble Quartet,” in addition to a merchant company that had been in cahoots with them for ages. Every two years, the leader of the nation changed from one representative to another, but none of them ever held absolute power. They were simply a politician that made appearances once in a while to mediate internal squabbles or deal with diplomatic hiccups. Edogawa enjoyed the luxury of a rather relaxed atmosphere, while the other Northern Nations were long at war.

The Noble Quartet were in discussion, each of them with bitter looks on their faces.

“Slaves from Hellion territory... That’ll be a handful.”

“Why are they being sent to our nation, anyway? We already have the mess from that Invasion to take care of.”

“Give them the boot as quickly as possible.”

“Fortunately for us, the Paladin is combing through their backgrounds.”

“That one. Certainly good timing for us.”

They liked to call their lackluster discussions ‘congressional meetings,’ although they all looked as though they wanted to get these pesky annoyances dealt with as quickly as possible. The leader of the republic, who happened to be the chairman of the merchant business, kept his head down without saying a word. Of course, as a figurehead, he never made any difficult decisions when troubles arose. If he did anything to impact anyone’s profits, he would suffer retaliation when they became the next leader. In the end, he had to resort to a wishy-washy attitude that gave neither significant advantages nor

disadvantages to anyone.

“It has nothing to do with our country, after all.”

“Indeed. Imagine the mess we’ll be in if this puts a target on our back for the Hellions.”

“The Paladin is here. Why don’t we toss them over to the Tzardom? They’re the ones chanting for the salvation of the commoners.”

While this proposal might have sounded unkind, other nations would have kicked them all out without any explanation, or even *dealt with them* in an unsavory manner. There was no nation on the continent who would volunteer to take in a mass influx of people with unknown backgrounds, even if they could afford to.

“Cleaning up the Bastille Dungeon is a more pressing matter. The Invasion has driven off business.”

“Yes, that is in fact more pressing.”

“The aid to rebuild the city is costing us an arm and a leg...”

“*Dungeon*, posh. What is it but a cesspool of thugs? None of it matters if we lose our actual business.”

With the slaves off their minds, the meeting moved on to the next item of its impromptu agenda.

Also unique among the Northern Nations, Edogawa shared a border with Animania. As no one wanted to take over a land under constant threat of demi-human invasion, it was seen as a sort of dam against military pressure. As a result, Edogawa had become a safe haven during war seasons. One could call it a Switzerland, or more like a vacation destination. The wealthy individuals of neighboring nations enjoyed some time off during war seasons, and only returning to their home countries when wars were on hold. The money that those wealthy tourists dropped on their vacations served as vital income for Edogawa.

The Invasion had completely thrown a wrench in that income plan this season, much like a large-scale terrorist attack would do to any tourist

destination.

“Why don’t we isolate the city of Rookie and that fortress on the border?”

“I second that. We can’t let such places drive business away.”

“Lockdown? Why not? Sounds like a plan to me.”

Sacrificing a piece of their nation was a small price to pay for maintaining their flow of wealthy tourists. The Noble Quartet had no use for new adventurers nor their little dungeon.

Finally, the leader spoke up in protest of this proposal. “A moment. If we lock down those locations, we would be advertising that our nation is in danger. This is a problem that won’t just go away if we sweep it under the rug.” He seemed to want the income from the adventurers. As a leader of the merchant industry, he definitely didn’t want any part of the nation cut off.

The Noble Quartet wore expressions even more bitter than before. Quickly, they found another target for their blame.

“Look at the damage we’ve suffered while that Paladin was in the area!”

“Well said. Accordingly, the city is half in ruins.”

“The Tzardom’s philosophy is all talk. We all know that.”

“Aren’t the slaves here because of the reputation of the Paladin? Naturally, the responsibility should fall on the Tzardom.”

The meeting continued spiraling. In short, they had no real solution in mind for the problem, nor the motivation to find one. All they wanted was for their tourism to return to normal.

“We must bring business back to normal. Inns from around the country have been buzzing in my ears about it.”

“At this rate, most of our valuable import foods will rot in storage.”

In any world, the wealth of the people directly led to tax income. All at the table were desperate to restore their bottom line.

“I have an idea... What if we distribute a meat voucher to every tourist who comes in?”

“Meat voucher...?!”

“Indeed. A certificate one can exchange for a serving of meat. Give them an extra *oomph* for their buck.”

“A splendid idea!”

“Wait a minute! We have to give out a fish voucher, too! My land has most of the nation’s fishermen.”

The leader wanted to groan. No amount of vouchers would solve their tourism problem, since everyone who came to Edogawa longed for security, not protein.

As the meeting further devolved and all in attendance began to look exhausted, the leader spoke quietly, “First of all, the slaves will be the Paladin’s problem. Of course, that may cost us some goodwill with the man...” His comment was met with begrudging agreements around the room. As much as they liked to complain, they didn’t want to make an enemy out of the Paladin renowned throughout the continent. They certainly didn’t want him refusing to aid them during the next Invasion. “In fact, we should advertise with grandeur that the Paladin is staying in Edogawa, to assert to current and potential tourists that our nation is as safe as it always has been.”

“I second that suggestion. But what of the slaves?”

“Why don’t all of us here, including myself, chip in for a relief fund to give to the Paladin? He will take care of the issue without a scandal.”

“So, we contribute in funds only... That seems the appropriate compromise.”

With that issue settled, they had another urgent matter to discuss: the man who called himself the Demon Lord, who had eradicated all of the monsters during the Invasion. For the congress of Edogawa, he seemed more threatening than the problem he solved.

“I’ve heard he cast an incredible spell that eliminated all monsters there, even those within the dungeon...”

“You don’t seriously believe that? I’ve never even heard of a spell like that.”

They knew that chaotic battles could lead to tales of hero figures and myth-

like war stories. History was rife with ungrounded tales, but in this case, another unbelievable tip seemed to back up the story.

“In Suneo, he took on an angel—”

“That’s just what the Tzardom calls it. It’s a variation on a golem.”

“Some regions called it a ‘mock angel’...”

“It doesn’t matter what it’s called! Why did that man come to our nation, anyway?!”

The meeting resumed its devolving spiral. None of them had ever seen or spoken to the Demon Lord, after all, and speaking based on assumptions wasn’t going to do them any favors.

The leader proposed as neutral of a solution as he could think of. “In any case, we know that the man is from the Village of Rabbi. We should send a messenger to scope out his intentions. We are also in a position where we are obliged to make a formal show of gratitude.”

The rest of the congress shared a look at one another before agreeing to that, then rose from their seats in an apparent dismissal. The leader, too, rolled his shoulders as he wasted no time getting out of the room.

——The city of Rookie, Republic of Edogawa.

The city was overflowing with people, most of them the unsavory type. After Rookie suffered a devastating blow from the Invasion out of the Bastille Dungeon, the Paladin had taken the helm in steadily restoring the city. The workforce for the task mostly comprised the dungeon-crawling adventurers, dubbed “Rookies.” With the dungeon sealed off for security, the Rookies struggled to find work anywhere else. Adventuring was never a prestigious occupation to begin with in this world, mostly undertaken by those with no education, reputable family, or money. Those in that kind of predicament adventured if they lived inland, and became sailors if they lived by the water. While some adventurers set out to test their strength, most were simply born as the second or third son to a farmer. Most had no land to tend, no connections to find work in a mine, and not enough brains to work as a

merchant.

“Dammit. Another day of shoveling rubble, covered in dirt...”

“Stop bitching. At least it puts food on the table.”

The adventurers weren't happy with their circumstances, either. After all, if they had any talents or skills that would have allowed them to make a living with a more commonplace occupation, they would have never become adventurers in the first place. Who would voluntarily take a job that involved risking one's life every day? Furthermore, they would have no means of survival if they were to be seriously injured on the job.

“I heard someone got pinned by a pile of rubble there that came down yesterday.”

“They had to amputate his leg...”

“Lot of guys got their throats or lungs fried by the fumes from those monsters, too.”

Naturally, with the relative lack of medical advancements in this world, a single injury could ruin one's life. When these men signed up to be adventurers, they traded their safety in for a pack of tokens, ready to gamble with it in the dungeons. Seafarers were betting the same tokens that, on each voyage, their ship would make it across the water. In either case, these lifestyles were far from steady.

Men and women in these desperate situations had flooded the city, which was a grave issue. Only a fraction of them had found work in restoration, leaving most to wander around the streets without any work. With nothing else to do, they drank and gambled pocket change. The number of brawls and assault cases exploded throughout the city despite the restoration efforts.

(One thing after another...) With exhaustion creeping over his expression, Weeb kept moving through a mountain of paperwork. He had always set up camp outside the city whenever he could help it in order to avoid contact with higher-ups, but that wouldn't cut it this time. He had now rented a meager flat to use as his workspace, and he already had his hands full with distributing tasks and dealing with the rise of crime which resulted when Mynk had brought in a

whole new influx of bodies. As he grew more tired, Weeb couldn't help but recall the conversation that took place at the time.

"They were enslaved in Hellion territory...?"

"Yep. I'm passing you the baton, Big Hero."

"If-If I may have a moment...! They're—"

"Black Phoenix within my right eye... Give me wings!"

With that, Mynk had vanished without a trace. Of course, she then returned several times to drop off more people, leaving Weeb to deal with them. Merely asking for the background of the 500-or-so people was arduous enough. Some of them were seriously injured or malnourished, but the medicine men and women could hardly come around, as they had their plates full with those injured during the Invasion. Even the local Temple of Light was filled to the brim with refugees.

Weeb had already requested aid from the Tzardom, to no avail. (Why won't they do something about this...?!) His grip tightened on the document he had been skimming. Unbeknownst to Weeb, some of the rescued slaves had been first sold off by the Tzardom, which made the higher-ups hope for their death more than their recovery. What's more, the Tzardom had larger issues to deal with. (When it rains, it pours... But this is a monsoon.) Weeb had already received word of what had happened in the capital of Suneo, which made his heart sink even further. He had heard that a troop from his country retaliated when attacked by a band of Satanists, leaving the capital nearly destroyed. To boot, the Demon Lord had destroyed an out-of-control 'angel' with a single blow and astonishing ease. He had even heard a rumor that one of the Holy Maidens had defeated a devil summoned by the Satanists. All rumors warranted a first-hand explanation before believing them, but Weeb couldn't afford to leave Rookie at the moment.

"M-Mister Paladin...! Lady Mynk is outside the city...!"

"Is it time already? Thank you, Mister Daruma."

"M-My name's actually Hummer..."

Weeb rose from his seat. Yet another issue had come crashing down onto his

plate. One of the Animadmirals, of all people, had brought in more people enslaved in Hellion territory. A layman's brain might have exploded at the series of unbelievable events.

"How is Miss Mynk, Mister Daruma?"

"I-I don't know how to... Something about The Darkness, it all went over my head..."

"She doesn't change, does she?"

"A-And, my name's actually Hummer..."

Hummer's muttering went unheard by Weeb as he entered deep contemplation, dashing Hummer's hopes of having his name correctly remembered. The nickname had been invented by Akane, then passed on from Mynk to Weeb. Akane certainly shared the Demon Lord's tendency for inconveniencing everyone around them.

"We are at your service, Sir Weeb!" Three white knights lined up outside of his rental greeted him in unison. They were the White Trinary, a trio of seasoned fighters recruited from all corners of the continent.

Kaiya, the pseudo-leader of the trio, gave Hummer a nasty look before saying, "We've heard that an Animadmiral is on its way... Do you believe it, Sir?"

"It's most likely true," Weeb answered. "That pair of S-Ranks is involved, after all."

"Those bitches, always hurling these problems at us...!"

As much as the Trinary griped about it, it was good news for them that the humans enslaved in Hellion territory had been released. The good news simply came at a bad time while they were in a bad place. They cursed, wondering why they were being sent to Rookie of all places. How could a city filled to the brim with its own issues accept a flood of refugees?

"Return to work, please," Weeb announced to the Trinary. "Make sure there are no incidents."

"B-But Sir, it's too dangerous to face an Animadmiral on your own!"

"No need to worry. Mister Daruma will protect me if things go sideways,"

Weeb assured them, in a rare attempt at humor.

“Huh...?! M-Me?!”

While Weeb saw no recourse but to make light of the situation, the Trinary pierced Hummer with their eyes.

Weeb started walking away with a wave, and Hummer rushed to follow. The Trinary watched with concern, when Kaiya let his true feelings slip, “The bastard... Buzzing around Sir Weeb like a fly...!”

“Indeed! Who does he think he is?!”

“Trying to *whore* his way into Sir Weeb’s good graces... Mark my words, they will *not* share a bed! Not on my watch!”

Ultima and Mushroom chimed in, piling on the slanderous accusations. Of course, Hummer was an average Joe with no ulterior motive, and had just so happened to come in contact with Mynk. After seeing how busy Weeb was, Mynk had casually told Hummer to help him out.

“While I despise the man’s character... His *body*...” Kaiya’s gaze focused on Hummer’s jiggling handles and posterior. The other two followed his gaze.

“Is rather *thick*. Quite a sight to watch him leave.”

“I’d prefer a bigger ass.”

Fortunately for Hummer, he heard none of these mutterings.

Outside the city gate, Mynk cheerfully waved at them from some distance away, where she was standing with Olgan. “Over here, Little Paladin. And Mister Daruma.” Olgan, meanwhile, was stoically looking off in another direction. “The leader of the ape-hybrids is almost here,” Mynk added.

“Is he...? Have you met them already, Miss Mynk?”

“I have. We fought together to vanquish a grand evil. But there is always a greater darkness to swallow the smaller,” Mynk chuckled, dramatically covering her right eye without any intentional subtext. Weeb had already learned not to take anything she said too seriously. “And once we hand them over, we’ll be off.”

“This city has been devastated by the Invasion. It can’t possibly take another influx of people.”

“Just ask your country for help,” Mynk retorted.

“Their response was less than favorable...” Weeb gripped his fists in shame.

There was nothing he could do about it. The Northern Nations were engulfed in war, each of them hellbent on shutting out refugees and securing their borders. No nations could afford to support such a large population who would need to be fed and housed, especially in times like these. Even if they *could*, why would they want to?

While Mynk showed a certain level of understanding, Olgan had stinging words to say. “That’s how your country always is. They cry and chant for the salvation of the poor, but never back it up with action.”

“Hey, Olgan...”

“It would have been better if it remained a mere bystander, since your country spreads war and turmoil throughout the nation. They build temples everywhere to instigate unrest, and propagate a bloody and endless cycle of war.”

Weeb looked at his feet, unable to retort. In truth, the Northern Nations had only been able to wage war as long as they had thanks to the cheap imported food from the Tzardom. Without it, the resources of most nations would have long since dried up, naturally leading to peace treaties and ceasefires. No country could perpetually fight without aid. And, in fact, the Tzardom of Light was the one intentionally sewing strife among the nations. As they grew their strength in the West, the Tzardom orchestrated the Northern wars as if they were playing with pieces on a game board, evenly wearing out their neighbors.

“Who will the people follow... A ‘light’ in name only, or someone who brings about tangible salvation, even through brute strength?”

“Are you speaking of *him*?”

“The humans sent here, and the ones who are about to arrive, are only here because of his actions. What was your country, who preaches of the Light and salvation, doing in the meantime?”

“Come on, Olgan! What’s the use of telling him that...?!”

Weeb remained silent, taking Olgan’s verbal barrage. In fact, infiltrating Hellion territory and saving those enslaved would have been a pipe dream for anyone else. It wasn’t something that could be done at the drop of a hat, either.

While Weeb didn’t deserve Olgan’s blame, he took it to heart. “My country is the way it is because of my failures.”

Olgan huffed and looked the other way, unamused. She never liked the Tzardom, who maintained a public goal of eliminating all Hellions.

“Forgive me for asking, but was he involved in your change as well?”

Olgan was in possession of a magical item that camouflaged her aura, but Weeb saw right through it. He sensed that Olgan was no longer a Firebrand, but a full-blown Devil.

“I was chosen by Lucifer...” Olgan uttered as she drew her hood back, assured of her fate.

Witnessing the horns on her head, Weeb swallowed his words. In addition to a spine-chilling aura, he sensed the incredible presence of Fire.



“Olgan... How long are you going to keep this up?!”

“I’m only speaking the truth.”

“Snap out of it! It’s like you handed him your heart on a silver platter!”

“He can have my body with it too.”

“Shut your mouth! His brainwashing’s gone deeper than I thought... Is that how I’m going to feel if he places more curses on me?!”

“I wouldn’t worry about that...”

As Weeb watched the two bicker, cold sweat trickled down his back. Before he knew it, this pair of (all things considered) reliable acquaintances had been taken in by the Demon Lord. This was as if the Demon Lord had stolen a vital force for humanity.

“When you say ‘chosen’...”

“Don’t worry, Mynk. You have not, nor ever will be, chosen.”

“H-Hey! That’s kind of insulting!”

“You are not the chosen one. I’ll say it as many times as it takes. You weren’t chosen.”

“Gah! Do you have to say it so *annoyingly*?!”

In a sense, Olgan’s choice of words was accurate. Valkyrie, the garment the Demon Lord had given Olgan, was once a piece of clothing given to players who betrayed the entire player base during a fight over the Sleepless Castle. While most players saw defeating the final boss as their goal in the game, these traitors fought against them to protect the final boss, of all things. During battles over the Sleepless Castle, the players would have to go through the traitorous groups of fellow players before even reaching the advisors. This was something Akira Ono had created to divide the players, and the dynamic had continued over the years.

Players who wore Valkyrie were notable for the advisors, too. For one, they could not attack each other, even with AOE attacks. Later in the Game, the traitorous players became more and more powerful, making them allies of the

advisors. In that sense, Olgan really was chosen.

The two finally halted their pointless debate and squinted into the distance.

“That cloud of dust... Here they come.”

“That’s a decent number of carriages.”

Soon, Monkey Magic and Xiaoshou came in, riding a yellow, cloud-like object.

“Phew...” the leader of the apes sighed. “We finally made it.”

“I don’t like riding this thing, it sucks so much Stamina...”

Weeb thinned his eyes, on alert, seeing one of the infamous Animadmirals for the first time. Hummer, who had become completely immobilized behind him, fell to the ground.

“Hm?” Monkey Magic looked to Mynk. “You’re the chick with bandages on, who wasn’t even hurt. You’re alive.”

“Of course I am. Never assume I was killed.”

“Aren’t you going to play Deer-Hybrid, miss? We don’t mind if you’d rather hop around for a bit.”

“Who’re you calling a deer?!”

Weeb didn’t know what to make of the familiarity between them. He felt like a large, vital piece of information was missing, and no longer seemed confident that Mynk would act in the best interest of humanity.

Olgan stepped up. “Thanks for what you did.”

“Hm. Your eyes look much better than they did,” Monkey Magic remarked. “Women without hesitation are strong.”

Olgan let a rare smile slip, and looked towards the cloud of dust approaching from behind the ape and the kappa. A long caravan of open-ceiling carriages approached, each of them led by Sleipnir, considered both a mystical beast and a Hellbeast. The Sleipnir had the large, black body of a horse and a striking white mane, with eight legs and hooves. It was clear to see that they were on another level from the horses that humans reared.

Olgan said, “Our job’s done, now. We’re headed north.”

“North?” Weeb parroted, but Olgan closed her eyes without answering. She saw no obligation to give Weeb an explanation.

“And so is our job,” Monkey Magic chimed in. “We’re gonna party like chimps tonight!”

“Another party?” Xiaoshou grumbled. “I’m getting tired of this...”

“Now, weird human with the box... Yeah, you,” Monkey Magic said as he pointed to Weeb. He glared at him, his eyes flickering with what seemed like murderous intent. “You seem like a decent fighter for an inferior human... But step into our forest and we’ll kill you.”

“I’ll pray I never find myself there.”

“And tell the false god that I’m not giving back this band on my head!” Monkey Magic jumped on his cloud and flew off.

Xiaoshou ran after him, shouting into the sky, “Hey, don’t forget me here! How could you?!”

“Oh, I really did forget.” The cloud pulled a U-turn, and then a somersault as the ape grabbed the kappa off of the ground. The acrobatic maneuver earned a burst of applause from the refugee caravan. Perhaps Monkey Magic had intended it as a sort of show of dominance.

Once they were far from Rookie, the confident grin faded from Monkey Magic’s expression. “That human with the box... He’s dangerous.”

“What do you mean?”

“I might lose to him. The Tiger might even lose to him.”

“Yeah, very funny. What human could beat you or the Tiger...?” Xiaoshou tried to laugh it off, but stopped when he saw the ape’s expression. The prideful Monkey Magic would have never even joked about that.

“We’ll tell Lady Tatsu about that human, just in case.”

“Y-You got it...”

The cloud sped off into the horizon, as the former slaves came out of their carriages and cheered in excitement. They were struck by the realization that

they had returned to the land of humanity.

The crowd that sent off Monkey Magic with roaring cheers was easily several hundred large. Weeb felt dizzy at the sight of them.

Olgan noticed this and devilishly whispered into the Paladin's ear, "If it's too much for you, just send them off to *him*."

"Don't be ridiculous..." Weeb scowled. Pass them off to the Demon Lord? As if. The last thing Weeb wanted to do was send these poor people to be ruled by him, especially after they'd finally just escaped Hellion territory.

"You've got a better idea?" Olgan taunted. "You know another place where people are ready to welcome them with open arms? If you do, then I'll say no more."

"I'll take them to my home country myself..."

"They'll be thrown out before you can even make it back to Rookie. Besides, you think *your* country will be accepting of the former slaves of Hellions? They'll see them as tainted, 'Bedeviled,' perhaps. Burn them at the stake to make an example." Olgan's pointed assessment stuck in Weeb's ear. He had no retort. "Trust me," Olgan continued. "Just put this particular ball back in his court. He's the one who started this mess, after all. I thought you humans loved assigning blame," she snarled, her sarcastic spitfire directed more towards the Tzardom that seemed to loom behind Weeb, charged by years of mistreatment.

"I know it's a tough pill to swallow, little Paladin," Mynk finally interjected. "But Olgan's right about this. Even Holylight's better for them than the Tzardom."

"But..."

Two people materialized before Weeb.

"One helluva swarm," Tahara observed. "That's what I call a pile of gold. The Secretary's knocked it out of the park again."

"Many of them are wounded or ill... A pile of gold indeed," Yu chimed in.

Weeb was left bewildered. What did they mean? Why did they seem so cheerful? How did they appear out of thin air?

After quickly looking over the horde of refugees, Yu and Tahara turned their gazes to Olgan, her attire in particular.

“Well looky here!” said Tahara. “Looks like you’re the Secretary’s Zero-Zero-One. Feels good to red-rover a trusty ally.”

“I hear you’re among the most powerful in this world. Happy to have you on board.”

Tahara and Yu showered Olgan with warm smiles, but there was no rhyme or reason to it. Anyone wearing the garb Olgan was currently wearing was a ‘trusty ally’ regardless of their personal beliefs or feelings. It signified a quality beyond the wearer’s actual strength or personality. Akira’s Ono’s attention to detail had shone through in this world again.

“I’m Olgan. While Mynk here isn’t *chosen*, she’s not hostile. Nice to meet you both.”

“H-Hold on, I don’t *want* to be chosen, remember?!”

Tahara chuckled at this, and Yu kept her smile directed at Olgan as if Mynk didn’t exist. While not nearly as extreme as Yu, Olgan could also be as cold and calculating as it took to achieve her goals, making them kindred spirits in a sense. Moving forward, either of them would perform any heinous act if they thought it would benefit the Demon Lord. They each seemed to know it, too, as they separated from the group to discuss something between themselves.

Tahara seemed eager to bring home the migrant caravan. He turned to Weeb as if everything was settled, saying, “Well then. We’ll take it from here. Say hi to the Tzar for me.”

“Wait!” Weeb cried. “Do you mean to enslave them all over again?!”

Tahara scratched his head in disbelief. “What kind of business do you think we’re running in Rabbi? We’re so swamped down there, I’d even take sacks of potatoes if they could work... In fact, I’d take anyone with time on their hands.”

“I hate to say this,” countered Weeb. “But I must ensure their safety—”

“Thought you’d say that. Got a little note from Mademoiselle Luna and the Madam.” Tahara handed Weeb a wax-sealed envelope and lit a cigarette.

The letter was indeed signed by both Luna Elegant the Holy Maiden and the famously wealthy Madam. Weeb's hands quivered. Refusing their request after reading this letter would be synonymous with spitting in their faces. That could easily lead to a diplomatic meltdown.

"Don't sweat it," Tahara said. "They won't find better conditions anywhere else."

Weeb swelled with disbelief, but the note in his hand prevented him from voicing it. The Madam's wealth was known throughout the continent. As she had numerous Earth Spell Stone mines, Weeb assumed she could really use a lot of working hands. Miners, especially in this world, had short careers.

After a long moment of silence, Weeb finally relented and handed a leather bag to Tahara. He couldn't expect any aid from the Tzardom, and he predicted that the Republic congress would chase the refugees off by force, as if they were a horde of wild beasts. There was nothing else Weeb could do when he already had his hands full rebuilding the city after the Invasion.

"I... have no way to save them. Put these to use, at least. That's money from the Republic congress, and this is from me," he handed Tahara a box that apparently contained his net worth.

Tahara was taken aback. The bag from the congress was one thing, but the box contained *five* Holy Coins, the value of which Tahara knew well by now. (This guy's something else...) He couldn't help but secretly be impressed by the Paladin. Who would give away *millions* in cash to complete strangers with such nonchalance?

Of course, Tahara couldn't comprehend Weeb. While he sensed something honorable within the short and drab Paladin, he felt a twinge of fear and disbelief towards such a creature. Tahara always saw humanity as a despicable lot who put their own desires and agendas before all else. This view was the very foundation that allowed Tahara to understand others and frame them. But Weeb seemed beyond any reasoning he could come up with. As he leisurely smoked his cigarette, Tahara couldn't help but think, (Good thing I put him on the Secretary's docket. This guy's above my pay grade.) Tahara returned the box to Weeb and walked away towards the caravan.

Taken aback by the gesture, Weeb rushed after Tahara. “Wait! If you can use this to make their lives better—”

“I don’t need your money. This city’s in a pickle, too, isn’t it? Why don’t you put that to use here?”

“But—”

“Sorry, you gotta take the rest up with the Secretary. I try to let my boss handle the complicated stuff.” Tahara kept walking, waving him off.

Yu returned from her discussion with Olgan and gave Weeb a side-eyed glance. “You again.”

Thank you for your help, Weeb tried to say, but Yu’s aura was too foreboding to allow for that. He almost wondered if she was the one who caused the Invasion in the first place.

“I hear many stories of you from my patients... And of your grandiose aspirations. If your ideals mean so much to you, you must serve the Secretary.”

“What do you mean by that...?”

“Must you ask? Let me rephrase... Obey God’s will.”

“God...?!” Weeb could hardly see straight. The Demon Lord himself had boasted that those who opposed him were the rebels. The statement had only been a desperate throwaway on the Demon Lord’s part, but it was gaining more weight at every turn. Yu even sensed The Creator within the Demon Lord, whom she could only describe as ‘God’ at this point. Weeb found no amusement in the analogy. All myths would be turned on their heads if the Fallen Angel Lucifer became God.

“H-He may be *your* god...”

“He’ll be everyone’s God in no time... His will is beyond this world,” Yu mysteriously declared and left without a second glance at Weeb, as if he blended into the background.

Weeb, on the other hand, shuddered as he watched Yu go. He could understand the meaning of her dreadful aura, considering that she served the Fallen Angel Lucifer, but there was something more about her. (How is there

such a powerful aura of Prayer about her...?!) Weeb had an acute sense of good and evil, and amidst the eerie air around her, he saw countless shimmering lights. They were prayers of the powerless, along with their hopes and gratitude... While some higher-ranked clergymen possessed the same lights in the Tzardom, Yu's were on another level of density. Weeb could almost see Worship within the lights. (She's not someone who would bring joy and happiness to others... I don't think.)

Unbeknownst to Weeb, Yu had been practicing medicine on the poor for free. In this world, an ailment or injury often spelled death for anyone less fortunate. Even if they could afford treatment, many struggled to pay off the medicine. To them, Yu, who cured any ailment free of charge, was none other than the Goddess of Salvation.

(The prayers given to her... It's like she's a goddess...) Weeb thought of the goddess Moira, sung about in legends of old, who was now considered a taboo figure in the Tzardom. She was a fierce character of mythology who brazenly criticized the rule of the Great Light, and at times even overruled or overwhelmed the Great Light. The powerful goddess, however, had disappeared from history at the same time as Lucifer's fall from the heavens. (Could it be...?) No legends told of what became of the goddess after that. The common belief in the Tzardom was that she had faced Lucifer, bearing his ambitious fangs, and was defeated. However, the rest of the world rumored that she willingly fell alongside Lucifer. The goddess owed her popularity to the numerous myths of her that broke the mold: saving people on a whim, handing out immortality, disrupting destinies, and even forcing the Great Light to follow her orders. The people seemed to believe, no matter how much the Tzardom denied it, that the free-spirited goddess Moira would have chosen to go with Lucifer.

(When I saw them two together...) The sight of the pair looking down on the flood of monsters from above during the Invasion... Had they not appeared as none other than Lucifer and the goddess Moira? (When I first met him, he was merely a voice. And the other day...) The Demon Lord he finally beheld was pitch black from head to toe, and becoming of his title as the Legendary Rebel, he impossibly embodied wisdom and violence at once. (Some myths tell of the

three goddesses of Moira...) Various stories and myths circulated in Weeb's brain, dragging him down in a spiral of speculation.

"M-Master Paladin... Everyone's... leaving..." Hummer timidly pointed out.

Weeb silently watched the crowd. Countless carriages that must have been standing by outside of the city came rolling by after another, and the people happily climbed into them. Every single one of them was adorned with the famous flag of House Butterfly.

"M-Master Paladin... If I may..."

"What is it?"

"I would like to go with them, if at all possible..." Hummer seemed to have thought this through, thinking that he was too clumsy to work to restore the city. The only thing that awaited him here was the daily ridicule of young adventurers. He seemed to see hope in a brand new environment.

Weeb knowingly nodded. "Take this with you," he presented Hummer with a piece of metal. "Any company will deliver your letter as fast as possible."

"L-Letter...?"

"Whenever you think of it, please let me know how you're doing. I'll be in this city for a while." Weeb extended his right hand.

After a few moments, Hummer finally realized that the Paladin was waiting for a handshake, and freaked out. "I-I wouldn't dare... M-Master Pala—"

Weeb clasped Hummer's hand and gave a gentle smile. He saw Hummer as an equal, looking into his eyes with care. "Mister Daruma. You were a great help to me here."

"I-I haven't done anything..."

"I find myself relaxing when I'm with you, somehow. I thought I would never feel as comfortable as I am now, ever since I was chosen by the Holy Garb Box... Take care."

Tears swelled in Hummer's eyes, and he gave a rushed bow before sprinting off.

Weeb watched the crowd disperse, with a flicker of loneliness in his expression, until he was left alone outside the city.

Reunion

—Secret Lair, Animania.

...And that's about it. That good with you, Mister Secretary?

Not bad.

The Demon Lord was Communicating with Tahara as he soaked in the igloo bath. Tahara reported on how he had met the Paladin and sent the numerous humans freed from Hellion territory to the village of Rabbi. Both of them seemed pleased with the turn of events.

What do you make of him, Tahara?

The Paladin? He's above my pay grade. He's sincerity embodied... He wouldn't bat an eye at a weasel like me.

The Demon Lord, sipping on his Fire Spirit, wondered if he, the king of deception and comedic errors, would stand a chance against him.

Same goes for Yu, Tahara added. Hate to say it, but he's all yours, Chief.

I concur. I'll take care of it.

We're on easy street, then. Out of everybody, he's the type I don't wanna face off against. It's a lose-lose defeating or killing him. In Tahara's opinion, all he would gain from killing the Paladin was a crowd throwing stones at him. In fact, he was sure that the people's hearts would leave the Demon Lord at once, their grudge leading to the inevitable revolution that he feared above all. *That's my two cents, anyway. What do you think, Mister Secretary?* Tahara asked with careful nonchalance, as to scope out the Demon Lord's thoughts. He imagined that the Demon Lord he knew back in the Empire would have executed the Paladin first thing, using it to spread fear among the people. A dictator's iron fist could not afford to let anyone slip that might give hope to the masses. That would eventually lead to their downfall.

After a brief moment of silence, the Demon Lord answered honestly. *He*

attempts to change the world according to his own convictions. Have you ever seen such arrogance? The Demon Lord chuckled.

Tahara, too, wore a smile. While they were on opposite ends of the morality spectrum, the Paladin and the Demon Lord were much alike in that way. Tahara found it insane that both of them were trying to make the world bend to their will. He couldn't comprehend it. *I've noticed... That the city of Rookie's important to you, chief.*

Hm...

The first city you went off to, this Invasion 'happened' to occur. And now you're delivering these folks here.

(Because I didn't know of any other town...!) The Demon Lord thought, but wisely kept quiet to avoid letting it slip.

Tahara seemed to infer something from the silence, and casually spoke again, *Well, then I'll take care of things. A piece of cake compared to facing off against that Paladin.*

(Crap...!) The Demon Lord's hand quivered, unbeknownst to Tahara. (What the hell is he talking about?! Give me some context, here!) The Demon Lord simply told Tahara that he was returning to the village of Rabbi, and shut off the Communication to flee from the confusing conversation. (Ugh... Things are going to snowball again behind my back... Oh, well. It'll work itself out. It always does. Gah ha ha!) The Demon Lord cackled, filled with the illogical sense of achievement again. The igloo bath ensured that he was completely detached from any sense of anxiety or dread.

After coming out of the igloo bath, the Demon Lord changed and approached Cake. "Ready to leave?"

"Y-Yes!" Cake answered energetically, but was secretly afraid to head into the Demon Lord's land. She imagined a worse hell than Hellion territory.

"Shame to cut my vacation short, but I've got work to do... Pack It Up," the Demon Lord commanded. The Secret Lair flashed and shrank to a grapefruit-sized ball of light before floating into his Item Folder.

Cake watched in amazement, but kept her shouts to herself. She was

beginning to learn that she couldn't afford to keep having big reactions to everything this man did.

"Shall we? I haven't returned in a while." The Demon Lord grabbed Cake by the shoulder and casually Quick Traveled to the village of Rabbi. The world flickered before them, as a nostalgic view surrounded them.

"This is where Master Demon Lord..." Cake saw a normal, human town filled with pedestrians and carriage traffic, most carrying some sort of material with them. At a glance, it almost seemed like a trading port.

"Welcome back, Mister Secretary." At the edge of the village, Yu greeted him with a smile before glancing at Cake beside him. The situation seemed similar to when he had brought Tron to the village. "Is she the...?"

"The Princess in Exile, perhaps. Have her fill you in on the details later."

Cake gave a polite bow as cold sweat formed on her forehead. From her experiences in the Slave Market, or perhaps just from her interactions with the Hellions, she momentarily saw Yu as a demon wearing human skin. (H-Holy crap... They're *not* human, after all...!) While Cake was now sure of that much, she knew that being scared now would not improve her circumstances. On the contrary, she renewed her resolve to take advantage of the Demon Lord's great power.

"Yu, give her a detailed physical. Then show her around the hot springs."

"Yes, sir." With a smile, Yu took Cake by the hand and strode off into the village. Cake's cold sweat was far from drying up if she was about to come face to face with the Hot Spring Resort and the Field Hospital.

After watching them leave, the Demon Lord watched the village, letting his coat flutter in the wind. The village of Rabbi was filled with workers as busy as bees, with heavy carriage traffic on the streets. The place was jumbled with shouts, laughter, and the sound of Bunnie children playing. But the atmosphere shifted as the Demon Lord walked in. Everyone shut their mouths and straightened their backs. Those who had never seen the Demon Lord before were either dumbfounded or terrified. A considerable number of people dropped what they were carrying. The Demon Lord's appearance could have been described as otherworldly, given his rare, pitch-black hair, his business suit

that was unlike any garments of this world, and his coat as black as night. There was no way to avoid everyone noticing when he walked down the street.

“Th-That’s *the*...”

“*The* Demon Lord...”

“I’ve seen him in the Holy City... He blew up a giant devil with one shot!”

“For real?!”

Just by walking, the Demon Lord amplified the murmurs among the people. He leisurely, in what seemed like piercing glares to the people on the streets, looked around the village, apparently in contemplation.

A girl came running, breaking the heavy air. “Master Demon Lord, you’re back!”



The Demon Lord froze in his tracks upon seeing Aku. His heart ached at the sight of her, but it wasn't an unpleasant sensation. Rather, it was the feeling of remembering something important. (Oh... So this is what it's like to come home.) A kind emotion, slightly different from the one felt by fathers coming home to their daughters, filled the Demon Lord's heart. Even he didn't know what to call this sensation.

"Welcome home, Master Demon Lord!"

"Hm. How have you been? Never mind, I can tell."

The Demon Lord hoisted up Aku with ease and gave her a beaming smile. She was covered in dirt from her face to her clothes, showing she had been working in the field.

"Um...! You'll get your hands dirty, Master Demon Lord!"

"Don't worry about it. Here, I brought you a little something." The Demon Lord presented the Adventures of Spot the Dog. It was seriously unimpressive.

"Wow! This is the story of the dog you read me in the Holy Castle!"

"Completely useless book, by the way."

"I-I don't think so! Spot uses his sharp fangs to save this girl dog from a slime —"

"A slime... I met one of those."

"Really?! Were you hurt?!"

"A weird one, like they have in hentai."

"Hentai...?"

As their conversation continued, all of the workers nearby were frozen at the sight of the fearsome Demon Lord showing a *smile* to Aku. And now, Tron came floating through the air and plopped onto the Demon Lord's back.

"I want to read too. And welcome home."

"Get off of my back, you koala."

"I want to read now. Read it. Now."

“Did I wander into a kindergarten...?” the Demon Lord grumbled as they walked off towards the Hot Springs resort.

The crowd, having witnessed the entire interaction, sighed in relief once they were out of sight.

“I gotta get *his* blessing before marrying Aku...?”

“Come off of it! You think a lazy bum like you can take care of precious Aku?!”

“I wish Tron would hang on my back...”

Considering the chaos the Demon Lord typically wrought wherever he went, the scene of the workers left muttering their fantasies together was a peaceful contrast. However, hurricanes at times continued to bring destruction even after they passed, as strong winds came from different directions. The village of Rabbi was about to be met with the blowback.

“Why don’t you go soak in the hot springs first?” the Demon Lord proposed once they had reached the resort.

“I will!” Aku answered. “Please read me the book later!”

“I’m going to hide and pop out at people coming in. Pop goes the Tron.”

“Y-You can’t do that!”

As the pair left, another arrived: Kyon and Momo, both wearing their bunny outfits. After frequenting the hot springs with the Madam, their skin was supple and their hair was luscious. Combined with their revealing outfits, they had garnered a secret popularity among the workers. While Luna was arguably more attractive than both of them combined, her status as a Holy Maiden made her less approachable, even in fantasies. In the same vein, Yu was mostly considered a god-like doctor despite her beauty. On the other hand, both Kyon and Momo had a lot of direct interaction with the workers, making them the girl-next-door type. Their beauty even seemed to supersede the fact that they were demi-humans and the preconceptions that came with that label.

“Welcome home... Hoppity.”

“Lady Luna is calling for you, Mister Black, hippity.”

“Good grief... How long are you two going to keep up the catchphrases,

anyway?” The Demon Lord started walking up the stairs, grumbling that he couldn’t even get a moment to rest.

He entered the usual room on the third floor to find Luna, who seemed fidgety, and Eagle, who was wearing a smile.

“Th-There you are...” said Luna. “Took you long enough.”

“Long story.” The Demon Lord put his coat and suit jacket on a hanger and undid his tie. He sat down on a floor cushion and looked around the room with nostalgia.

“W-Would you... like some tea?” Eagle offered a Japanese tea mug filled with black tea instead of green. The Demon Lord chuckled at the mismatched tableau he was in.

“Do you even *know* how long you’ve been away...? Where were you, and what were you doing? Don’t tell me you were off with some Miss Who-Knows-Who!”

“Hm... Who knows who, indeed.” The Demon Lord thought of Akane, Mynk, Olgan, and the Cat Hybrid. While she looked like a child to him, Cake was certainly a character, too. He realized he really hadn’t come in contact with any ordinary women and let out a chuckle.

“Wh-What are you snickering about?! You pervert! How many butts have those brutish hands—?!”

“What are you talking about?” The Demon Lord turned to Eagle, sipping on his tea. Her presence seemed so faint that he nearly forgot that she was in the room. “How are you feeling? Did Yu take care of you?”

“Y-Yes, she did... I’m all healed up now.” Eagle thanked him and lowered her gaze. There was a translucent air about her, so much so that she almost seemed untouchable.

“Hey, Demon Lord. Yu can heal anything, right? Even wings?”

“Wings...?” The Demon Lord noticed the pair of wings, short and misshapen as if they had been ripped off, protruding from Eagle’s back. “Yu can heal any injury or ailment. She can regenerate lost limbs or organs, too,” the Demon

Lord confidently confirmed, having seen Yu's ability in action several times.

"See, you heard him," Luna said to Eagle. "Have Yu heal them, already!"

"Luna... Who's going to want to be around someone with *wings*?" Eagle responded with gravitas, having been persecuted for just that.

While Luna usually strong-armed her perspective, this was a tough issue to press upon. "S-So?! We're in *my* land! If anyone says a *word*, I'll kick them out! No, you know what? I'll execute them! Execute them!"

"Don't be ridiculous..." Eagle answered.

The Demon Lord began to piece things together. Holylight was harsh against those called demi-humans, and Eagle and Tron would be persecuted anywhere outside of this village. In a sense, the Village of Rabbi was a special place with its own rules, shut out from the rest of the world. More accurately, the place was ignored by most nobles and people in power as an untouchable piece of land.

"I'm not like the Bunnies..." Eagle faintly muttered. There was a surviving myth about the Bunnies that told of how the Wise Angel loved them, which led to them being the only species of demi-humans allowed in Holylight. Someone like Eagle, though, with her wings, would become a huge issue. Eagle feared that she might become a weakness for Luna, an opening for others looking to take her down.

However, Eagle, who always thought of Luna's position, and Luna, who was simply concerned for a friend, were hard-pressed to find a compromise.

"People are weak," the Demon Lord finally said. "That's why they want to keep others below them. Gives them a sense of security," he said with an uncharacteristically serious tone. Luna and Eagle both listened, each considering the statement. "I believe I've seen many species since I've awoken," the Demon Lord continued. "Humans, Firebrands, Dwarves, Cat, Bull, and Monkey people, even a Kappa." The Demon Lord reminisced, realizing how ridiculous this all was, as if he had kept running into one alien species after another. He doubted that anyone on Earth had ever lived through an experience like he had. "As far as I can tell, none of them were much different from humans. They were all noisy, but fun. No sense in hating someone you can talk to and shake hands with." The Demon Lord found it very simple, precisely

because he had ignored all preconceptions of this world. If anyone else had suggested that humans could shake hands and get along with Dwarves and Firebrands, one could only imagine the reaction of those around them.

“You’re... accepting me too? Even if you burn bridges because of it?”

The Demon Lord wanted to spit in disgust. The way Eagle talked, it was as if they were in a classroom, where anyone who helped those getting bullied would only end up being bullied themselves. He found it ridiculous that grown adults were acting this way. “Ridiculous. Any bridge that burns is not worth having. And if they try to get in my way... I’ll have no mercy for them.” The Demon Lord’s glare shook Eagle. She saw an equal amount of cruelty and kindness in his black eyes. In truth, he would trample anything that got in his way without hesitation. “Well, they’re *your* wings, after all. Take your time and think it over. But...”

“But...?”

“It’s only natural to want to take back something you’ve been given... Or something you’ve created,” the Demon Lord declared. “If you need something, you’ll strive for it no matter what anyone says.”

Eagle feebly nodded, deep in thought.

Luna chimed in cheerfully, “I didn’t really get that, but it seemed like it clicked with Eagle... You do good once in a blue moon, Demon Lord. Keep up the good work for me.”

“If I keep hanging around you, I’ll be *embaldened*.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

The Demon Lord waved her off and retreated to the bedroom in the back, apparently still wanting more R&R after his vacation.

“I’ll let that slide for today,” Luna called. “All right, Eagle, let’s hit the hot springs.”

“Again? We’ve already gone twice today...”

“Don’t be stupid. The more you go, the more beautiful you become! We can’t pass up *any* chances to go!”

“It’s a waste of water... What’s the point of *me* being beautiful, at the end of the day...?”

“Ugh, shut up! I’m going to whip this penny-pinching out of you!”

“H-Hey...!”

Luna grabbed Eagle by the hand and rushed out of the room.

The Hot Springs Resort was a bona fide paradise for womankind. In fact, even men—in particular the elderly—couldn’t get enough of the place. Harts, who had been staying at the village, had his plan of a timely departure thwarted by the allure of the hot springs.

After performing his thorough daily training regimen and taking a simple breakfast, he found himself once again soaking in the hot springs. His exhausted muscles seemed to rejuvenate as quickly as his body warmed. (I must return to the fortress soon...) he thought to himself, and he thought this quite often, but his body seemed to disagree. Even Sambo had politely suggested that Harts indulge in some R&R for once, which certainly didn’t help him muster up the resolve to leave this place. (A truly incredible facility. Sometimes I feel as if I’ve been ensnared by a devilish charm...)

Harts had developed a routine of completing his daily training, chilling himself in the cold bath, working up some more sweat in the sauna, returning to the cold bath, and concluding with a soak in the star-gazing bath. Each day, he felt his exhaustion melt away and his body tone. From time to time, he also enjoyed bubble baths and carbonated springs to treat his aging, yet robust, frame. He had also taken to meditating in a solo tub. He had served his country so valiantly that a retirement in paradise couldn’t even come close to repaying his lifetime of work.

(And this star-gazing bath...) He couldn’t put into words how wonderful it was to soak in a perfect bath, outdoors, surrounded by towering bamboo. The scaredeer, a common Japanese contraption that let out a clank every few minutes as it filled with water and spilled over, provided a relaxing metronome. (The Empress... To think she kept a place like this all to herself...) The thought frustrated Harts for a moment before comfort took over again. After all, the star-gazing bath was equipped with the special effect of liberating a person’s

mind from the stress of their daily life, in addition to merely restoring their health. For someone like Harts, a man with much pressure and many responsibilities on his shoulders, there was no better place to relax than the star-gazing bath.

(Tomorrow...) he vowed to himself, as he did day after day, (I will depart and return to the fortress...) He was in a most tricky situation, similar to how the Demon Lord was perfectly content in his state of groundless fulfillment in the igloo bath within the Secret Lair.

“I brought you some wine, hoppity.”

“As silvery as always, hippity.”

Harts nearly jumped out of the bath at the sudden intrusion, but managed to quickly re-submerge himself, seeing that it was Kyon and Momo, who always seemed to be tending to him. “I told you... This side is for the men. Ladies should go to the other side—”

“Doesn’t matter to us, hoppity, we’re left in charge of the resort.”

“You’d better do as we say if you want to stay in that bath, hippity... Hippity-hippity-hop!”

In truth, the Bunnies were running the resort. Cleaning, replenishing supplies, and customer service, Kyon and Momo were at the helm, and Harts was simply a guest. Within these walls, the Bunnies ran the show, and Harts’ position held no ground.

“Look how you’re dressed...” he grumbled, averting his gaze. “Have you no sense of decency...?” Even for a man like Harts, who had grown out of his libido, the girls’ appearance unsettled him.

“You’re blushing, Grandpa. That’s kind of cute, hoppity!” Kyon teased.

“Setting a silver heart ablaze. How cruel we are... Hippity-hippity-hop!”

Momo’s bizarre yet theatrical laugh caused Harts to cover his face. There was but one thought on his mind. (Why did the Wise Angel take a liking to such a species...?) His mind wandered back to the age of mythology. His naturally stoic mind was now thinking about completely impractical curiosities.

To top it all off, the Demon Lord entered, having woken from his nap. “This *was* the men’s side, last I checked...” He was fully equipped, a bottle of spirit and some glasses in the wooden pail in his hand.

Harts moved to step out of the bath, but the Demon Lord stopped him with the raise of a hand.

“We’re also in charge of the management here, hoppity.”

“We wouldn’t mind washing your hair for you once in a while, hippity.”

“No need. You’re still using those catchphrases...? Oh, I forgot to mention earlier: there are thirty Bunnies coming back from Animania.”

“What...?” Kyon and Momo froze.

The village of Rabbi was once populated with numerous Bunnies before they emigrated away one by one, unable to bear the continuous drought and increasing taxes. None of those who left had any prospects for the future, which had always saddened those left behind just as much as those leaving. No matter where they went, they were always going to be discriminated against for being demi-human. It was clear to see that the future held little more for them than being forced to grow carrots in practical slavery.

“Wh-*Who’s* coming back?!”

“Do you know their names? Tell us!”

“I don’t know their names, but you should speak with Tahara about providing them with housing.”

“Yay! They’re coming back!”

“Let’s go tell everybody!”

The pair stormed off, and quiet returned to the star-gazing bath.

The Demon Lord shook his head and unwrapped his bath towel from his waist before slowly lowering into the bath. The instant he sank in, a sublime warmth enveloped him. Harts intently stared at the Demon Lord.

“Forgive my staff for intruding,” the Demon Lord said.

“No need for that.”

“How is your recovery?”

“I have all my limbs... Thanks to you.” After his leg regrew and his mangled arms began working as if nothing had happened, Harts couldn’t help but feel that he was treated with devilish magic. He had a million questions regarding the bizarre bandage and Yu’s treatment, but he also had trepidations about asking outright. Historically, devils whispered sweet temptations into man’s ear, creating an opening for them to slip into their hearts. Their most notorious example was them granting a wish and requiring an unexpected price. Harts shuddered to imagine what the Demon Lord might ask of him in return.

The Demon Lord, on the other hand, had no topic of conversation in mind that seemed appropriate to discuss with one of the most important men in Holylight. He simply kept his eyes closed in a display of thoughtfulness.

Harts decided to break the ice. “None of the history books tell how accepting you are of demi-humans.”

The Fallen Angel Lucifer’s relationship with demi-humans was a historical mystery. The only related story was how the demi-humans became independent through the mythical war between Lucifer and the Great Light, establishing a hostile relationship with humans.

“You won’t find me in historical documents...” This wasn’t a lie, of course. The most notoriety he could earn was as a wanted con artist.

“You mean to say they don’t accurately depict you?”

“I am accurately depicted here and now. Any other depiction is none of my concern.” The Demon Lord had effectively written out the true Lucifer from history.

Harts, meanwhile, recalled what the Madam had told him: *If you’re so concerned, see his rule for yourself. No need to open a history book when the real thing is right under your nose*, she had said, as if speaking to a bratty child. Harts chuckled, also recalling how he was unable to make a rebuttal.

“I must say, your physique is unbecoming of your age...” the Demon Lord muttered, impressed.

In fact, Harts was hardened and muscular despite being over 60. What’s

more, his body wasn't just for show, like that of a competing bodybuilder. His was adorned with countless scars telling tales of numerous battlefields. Even to other men, his appearance and demeanor were perfectly gallant, making him the ideal commander.

"I apologize for the eyesore. I'll be going," Harts said politely.

"Nonsense," the Demon Lord countered. "Where else can we have such quality time, man to man?" He stared Harts down with a sharp glare, ready to solidify a relationship with another political figure vital to Holylight.

To Harts, the proposal seemed eerily like a sweet whisper in his ear. (Quality time...? What does he mean by that?) Devils were notorious for corrupting men through temptation. While Harts acknowledged the theoretical difference between a devil and a fallen angel, he was nonetheless alarmed. (Could he possibly mean... *Quality* time?!) Harts trembled from head to toe, as the Demon Lord's diction reverberated in his mind.

How have you recovered?

Your physique...

Quality time...

I am accurately depicted, here and now.

Blood drained from Harts' face. The image of a fallen, or *corrupt*, angel made his fear seem even more real. They were naked and alone... The blissful hot spring had turned into a deadly gallows. One wrong step...

Harts squeezed out, his voice shaking, "F-Forgive me for such a personal question... Have you ever taken a wife? Had children? Nothing of the sort is mentioned in documents."

"I'm rather busy, actually. No time to chase women," the Demon Lord tactfully replied, fearing that Harts was trying to arrange a marriage for him.

(The Fallen Angel *does* have a twisted sexuality...!) Harts shook in terror.

He was struggling to find a way out of his predicament, when he was saved by a voice coming through the entrance.

"Looky here, couple of VIPs... Wonder what scheme they're hatching now?"

The naked Wo Wungol, leader of a notorious gang of bandits, the Moles, walked in. His muscular body was topped with a mane-like tuft of chest hair, which, along with his beard and mustache, added to his gruffness.

Harts saw an opportunity, and quickly rose to grasp it. "I've been soaking for a bit too long. Excuse me."

Harts left without giving Wo another look, leaving him and the Demon Lord taken aback. As Wo only saw Harts as a man who usually gave him nothing but a death glare, he let out a hearty laugh. "Heh, Grandpa Square... Go back to where you came from already." He brazenly strode into the tub, staring the Demon Lord straight-on. This was another reunion, in a sense. "It's been a while... *Master* Demon Lord."

"It has..."

"The hell's with that boy Tahara? Threatening a bandit into day labor. To boot, I'm practically a slave to that brat of a Holy Maiden. It's all gone down the crapper since I ran into you. For my Absolution, my hands were stabbed with needles until I passed out from the pain!"

"I see... That's hilarious."

"How's that, huh?!" The leader of the bandits furiously rose. The sight of a bandit raging in the wafting steam of the bath was comical in and of itself. "What's this 'hot spring,' anyway? How's there so much water coming out? That boy Tahara hasn't given me a straight answer yet."

"Boy... That brings back memories."

"Huh?"

The Demon Lord snickered, grabbing the bottles from his pail. Fire Spirit and Thunder Water, both very strong Dwarven alcohol.

Wo, who had acquired quite an eye for appraising stolen goods, stared at them in disbelief. The bottles that contained the drinks were extraordinary, made of Crystal Glass and decorated with intricate details like those used by royalty and nobility.

"H-Hey, aren't those...?"

“Gifts from an acquaintance.”

“Acquaintance...?! That’s Dwarven...!”

The Demon Lord carelessly poured some Fire Spirit into a glass and handed it to Wo, whose hand trembled as he peered into the pour of the amber liquid. In human society, this stuff was traded by the *drop*. He was practically given a glass full of liquid gold.

“J-Just so we’re clear... I can’t pay for this, so don’t expect me to.”

“It’s a gift, don’t be ridiculous.”

“All right. I don’t know *where* you snatched this from, but this ain’t on me.” Wo downed the whole glass in a gulp, foregoing any gesture of enjoying the aroma. “Wh...oa... This...”

“Isn’t too bad, is it?” The Demon Lord smirked as if he had distilled it himself.

Wo seemed oblivious to the comment. “Is... real. I had three drops of this stuff, long time ago. Heh heh heh...!”

The Demon Lord silently watched Wo laugh. The laugh, on top of the bandit’s appearance, seemed all too familiar. “Do you know someone named Aoki?” he asked. “The term ‘42-OMG’ mean anything to you?”

“Huh? What are you going on about? You better wet my lips some more if you got something to ask me.” Wo gleefully stuck his empty glass out.

The Demon Lord let out a chuckle as he concluded that their resemblance was coincidental. That was reassuring; he didn’t know how he would handle some sort of link between the real world and this bizarre fantasy world. As he poured another glass of Fire Spirit for the bandit, the Demon Lord asked, “How do you know Harts?”

“*Know* him? He nearly *killed* me, once. Had me surrounded before I knew it. Slaughtered my guys like we were a pack of cattle.”

“Right, you were a bandit... Ha! It’s perfect. I always thought you must have been a bandit or pirate in a previous life.” Something cold ran down the Demon Lord’s spine. ‘Previous life.’ Didn’t that phrase also apply to him...?

“Previous life, my ass. What are you, some fortune teller?” Wo jeered,

overjoyed by his second glass of Fire Spirit, showing quite the courage in the face of *the* Demon Lord.

“Never mind that... Well, what are you doing now?”

“The boy wants me to dig wells. Everyone around here’s off their rockers.”

“Wells... Tahara wants to put buckets on them, I’m sure.” An old memory came back to the Demon Lord. A memory that seemed too significant for him to have forgotten it.

“Yeah that weird bucket... And *this* place. The hell are you guys? Angels? Devils? Or are you Alchemists? Heard stories of them from the West.” Wo’s question was left unanswered as the Demon Lord silently drank from his glass, as if he was looking at the bottom of it for the rest of his memory. “What’s the point of digging wells out in this wasteland, anyway?” Wo went on. “The oh-so-wise nobles say this is ‘uninhabitable’ land, y’know.”

“An artist’s work is like blindly digging for a well, not knowing what lies underground. The only way to find out what’s there is to dig. Even if you’re left with nothing to show for it but pointed fingers and ‘I told you sos.’”

“Huh?!”

“An old friend said something like that to me, once... He looked a lot like you.”

With that, the Demon Lord pushed the floating pail across the tub and stepped out of the water.

Peering into the pail, Wo’s eyes widened. “Isn’t this... Thunder Water?! Hey, you know you’re never getting this back, right?!”

“Drink it. Sell it. I don’t care.”

“You kidding me?! This stuff’s too good to *sell*! You can’t put a price on this!”

“You can’t put a price on it, huh... You haven’t changed. Wait, no. Forget what I said.” The Demon Lord shook his head.

“Hey, Demon Lord?” Wo called with an uncharacteristically serious tone.

“Hm?”

“I had a dream... To dig up a well so everyone could drink as much water as they wanted. I don’t know if you’re a devil, or evil spirit, or whatever... But I’ll stick around. At least until I get tired of it.”

“Very well... So it’s my turn to work you like a dog? Do your best.”

“Huh?”

The Demon Lord chuckled, without malice, and walked away.

Wo wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but couldn’t help but drool at the bottle of Thunder Water. He could live in luxury for a considerable time if he were to sell it, but he seemed determined to drink it up himself.

When the Demon Lord walked out of the hot spring, he ran into Aku wearing a *yukata*.

“Have you been waiting for me?”

“Yes! I feel so happy that you’re back in the village...” Aku’s innocent smile was mirrored by the Demon Lord, as if she were his own daughter.

“This is a good time to set up a Secret Lair, then.”

“Secret... Lair?”

“Looks like things will get a bit busy tomorrow, so I’m going to set up a safe house, just in case.”

Aku responded with an adorable tilt of the head.

The Demon Lord took Aku to the empty plot of land adjacent to the Hot Springs Resort, then produced the Secret Lair from his Item Folder.

“Set up Base—Secret Lair.”

The ball of light blinked into a cozy cottage and blended into its surroundings. Aku had watched a base being set up before, but this was an entirely different construction.

“Th-That’s incredible! Is this a magic house, Master Demon Lord?!”

“Hm. The best man cave there is. No one will find you in here.”

“W-Wait... The house disappeared...”

“It’s almost undetectable except to the user. I’ll gift it to you, Aku.” The Demon Lord retracted the base and gave the ball of light to Aku.

She accepted it like it was a hot potato and gave a confused look.

The Demon Lord laughed at her struggle for a few moments before gently holding her hands to guide her through the process. “Now look at where you want to set it up, and yell ‘Set up Base.’”

“L-Like this...? S-Set up Base!”

At that moment, the Secret Lair materialized in the same spot. There was no reason at all that Aku had to shout those words, other than a little dose of placebo. Some players had dubbed it a Capsule House.

“W-W-Wow! There’s the house! I did it, Master Demon Lord!”

“Hm. Now you’re a bona fide player,” the Demon Lord self-importantly declared, as if he had raised a prodigy.

Aku seemed just as excited that she was able to experience the Demon Lord’s mysterious powers.

“Now let’s go inside,” the Demon Lord said.

“Yay!”

The interior of the Secret Lair was the same as before, decorated just like a mountain lodge, featuring a second-floor loft with an entrance to the attic. It also contained a cedar bath, igloo bath, a camping cot, and a hammock. There was even a campfire pit in the center that allowed for cooking. The Lair sparked a sense of adventure in every corner and appealed to all ages.

“Is this... Where you used to live?”

“More like where I *wanted* to live when I was a kid,” the Demon Lord smiled, reminiscing about his childhood. In fact, there were toy ray guns and insect models on the shelf.

“W-Were you ever a child, Master Demon Lord?”

“Of course I was. Sure, all I did was goof around...”

As they toured the Secret Lair, Aku happily spoke of her life in the village. How

she was studying with Tron under the Madam's tutelage, how she helped the Bunnies out in the field, how she helped hand out water and salt to the day laborers in the morning, and many more things.

The Demon Lord couldn't help but be impressed. "So you're working all day..."

"It's always fun," Aku innocently remarked.

The Demon Lord still believed that it was a child's duty to play, rather than do *actual* work. (Of course, she was doing horrible work before I met her... To boot, they tried to sacrifice her.) Considering all of that, Aku's life now must seem incredibly fulfilling. It wasn't unusual for young children to be put to work in this world, anyway. The same went for the Bunnies, who started working early in the morning. If he had told them to play instead of work, they would have looked back at him, confused.

"I mean, it's not bad to start getting work experience at a young age..."

"Um... Don't children work in your country, Master Demon Lord?"

The Demon Lord recalled, fondly, how working a paper route had become a popular trend when he was in elementary school. "There was a phase where every kid wanted to deliver newspapers..."

"Newspapers?"

"The point is, they needed people to deliver them. Deliverers went house to house from like three in the morning, leaving a set of papers at every house. You made about 500 yen... About 5 bronze coins." That was, of course, one of the lower-paying jobs out there, even after accounting for the fact that a child that age could not deliver as many papers as an adult. That being said, 500 yen was a lot of money for an elementary student.

Aku tried her best to comprehend what the Demon Lord was saying with the knowledge she had. "Did you do that delivery job, too, Master Demon Lord?" she asked, somewhat cheerfully. She couldn't imagine the Demon Lord's childhood, much less him delivering something door-to-door.

"No, I quietly mocked those who did. There was only so much a kid could earn. I thought it was a waste of time, working at the crack of dawn, no less."

“Oh...”

“On the other hand, I was jealous of them. They could buy the snacks and little toys they wanted. One of them even saved up to buy an expensive RC car. Then I realized... That I was deserving of mockery more than any of them, for disregarding their hard work,” the Demon Lord plainly conceded.

Aku quietly listened to the Demon Lord. While she didn’t understand parts of his story, she felt like this was a very precious confession for her to hear.

“That’s enough nostalgia for today. Point is, don’t overwork yourself trying to help everyone.”

“I won’t...!” Aku gently held the Demon Lord’s hand, as if to console a father who had just told her an embarrassing story from his youth. “I was reborn when you saved me, Master Demon Lord. I can’t thank you enough. I always think about that.”

The Demon Lord scratched his scalp, embarrassed by Aku’s sincere gaze. Something was different when he was with her. He felt himself relax, and at times come face to face with a deeper part of himself, with surprising ease.

“We’ll see about who saved who...”

Aku gave him a puzzled look.

“Nothing. Let’s get some rest for the night.”

“Oh, you haven’t read me The Adventures of Spot yet!”

“For real...?! Come on...”

The Demon Lord went on to read the story to Aku and Tron, an exhausted look pasted on his face. Despite the utterly nonsensical story, Aku and Tron seemed to thoroughly enjoy it.

A Cruel Conference

—Field Hospital, the village of Rabbi.

Tahara was scribbling notes on several sheets of paper sprawled out on a desk before him. He seemed to have more plans in store for the future of the village.

Yu walked into the room, looking strangely elated. “Is this your office for the day?”

“Boss Man’s back, so the resort’s a little crowded.”

The ladies staying at the resort had caused an uproar, demanding to see the Demon Lord in the flesh. Some seemed merely curious, while others obviously had more calculated intentions in mind. The reconciliation between the Madam and Harts, brokered by Luna, had become public knowledge, and the savvy nobles and ladies had already moved to secure their place in the soon-to-be-shaken-up power dynamic of Holylight. Some of the ladies even seemed to discern that the man who called himself the Demon Lord was an integral part of this shift in power, despite remaining in the shadows for the majority of his operations.

The ladies of Central high society, the Madam included, were all brilliant. Otherwise, their houses would not have survived. Knowing power, sensing power, and ruthlessly following and adhering to the powerful were all integral to their battle for survival. Both Tahara and Yu considered those savvy members of society to be easier to deal with, if anything.

“And what about the wayward princess...?” Tahara asked.

“Brilliant girl. I think I’ll have her assist me in my work.”

Tahara looked up from his paper. “You sure don’t say that every day.” His interest was piqued, what kind of person would make the Witch want to take her under her wing? “Must be a real fox, that princess.”

“I *much* prefer her to Ren or Akane...”

“Alrighty then...” Tahara seemed to infer some meaning from that and decided to change the subject. “Think she’ll be a good banner for when we take on Xenobia. Boss Man won’t let anything slip through his fingers... Feels like he reads a hundred steps ahead in every direction.”

“Yes, such a wonderful gift for him to bring us...” Yu adoringly said, imagining the Demon Lord planning move after move with nearly clairvoyant calculations.

Tahara muttered “Makes me wonder more and more why he keeps us around,” with a satisfied smirk on his face.

They were both convinced that everything was playing out according to the Secretary’s master plan. If the Demon Lord himself had confessed that he’d just happened to stumble upon the princess, Tahara and Yu would have laughed it off as a joke. The Demon Lord would not have found it so funny, but one could hardly blame the advisors for finding him reliable.

“And I tried making some of these.”

“What’s that?” Tahara asked, looking at the vial containing some neon orange powder.

“The powdered peel of a carrot harvested here.”

“As in the *garbage* part of the thing? What are you gonna use that for?”

“Is there anything inside that skull of yours? There’s an abundance of beta carotene in carrot peel.”

“Caro... what, now?”

“A strong antioxidant. Our bodies store it and change it to vitamin A as needed. That’s on top of boosting the body’s immune system. It also has properties to combat cancer and infections, stabilize mucus production and even prevent eye fatigue. It can improve your skin and stimulate circulation to —”

“I got it! So it’s good for you, right?!” Tahara interjected, looking to escape the impromptu lecture. While he could quickly learn and master most things, he wasn’t an expert in medicine or pharmaceuticals.

“I’m thinking about prescribing this for mild symptoms. We have so many

patients sometimes that I can't tend to them myself."

"By 'mild,' you mean like a cold?"

"That would be a good example. I've added properties to help with mild headaches, fevers, stomachaches, and general pain."

"That's a handy little prescription. Knowing that you made it, I can't help but think the secret ingredient is something a little more nefarious than some TLC."

The prescription, now effectively a cure-all for mild ailments, would allow Yu to get through to many more patients.

"I'm thinking of prescribing a small amount of *this* as a cure for epidemics."

"What do you mean by *epidemics*?"

"Scurvy, the Black Death, whooping cough, tuberculosis, malaria, the mumps, diphtheria, leprosy, syphilis, cholera, smallpox, chicken pox, measles, rubella... Plenty of diseases in this world, too."

"Haven't heard some of those names in a while."

Many on Yu's list had been conquered by humanity in exchange for much time and countless lives. Now, Yu was planning to catch this world up without paying such an ultimate price.

"What's this green one?" Tahara asked.

"Blended carrot leaves."

"Another find from the kitchen scraps...?"

"How does your brain even function? I'm genuinely curious. Carrot leaves contain calcium, magnesium, vitamins E, K, C... Not to mention—"

"Agh, all right! My bad! Wow, it's so good for you!" Tahara shouted in desperation to avoid the looming masterclass on nutrition.

"I plan to call the medicine for mild symptoms the 'Rabbi Pill.' It should be an effective advertisement for the village."

"That's a great idea! Works with the Boss Man's idea of gaining a reputation."

"I call the one that cures epidemics the 'Nine Interworld Nirvana Elixir.'"

“Nine... Inter-what who now?”

“Nine. Interworld. Nirvana. Elixir. It embodies the mercy of the Secretary.”

“That’s...” Tahara didn’t know what to say. In their previous world, their zealous supporters were dubbed the Nine, but Yu was acting as if she wanted to convert the entire population of Holylight to the Nine. “At least the sick folks won’t care why you’re saving their lives... They’ll probably keep thanking you in tears,” Tahara added as a jab.

In truth, the medicine could save countless lives. It wouldn’t be amiss to imagine that those patients would turn their gratitude towards the man behind the doctor and her concoction.

“These will become a specialty of the village, on top of raw carrots.”

Business-wise, it couldn’t get much better than using the byproduct of the carrots.

“I agree. We’re swimming in carrots, now.”

“On the other hand, I wonder what Akane is up to...”

“When she’s out, it’s on the Secretary’s orders. If we stick our nose into it, we might get burned.”

“Fine... I don’t want her wandering about the village anyway,” Yu spat out.

Akane, who always looked to fight the big fights on her own, who had a tendency to sympathize with the weak, was never destined to get along with Yu, who always put the Demon Lord’s aspirations above all else, and cut out anything unnecessary to their cause. As far as Yu was considered, she felt a much stronger kinship with Cake than she ever did with Akane.

“Well, now that Boss Man’s back... Let’s take care of some business.”

“Yes, let’s. I’ve also watered the flowers to celebrate his return.”

“Is that so...” A look of disgust flashed on Tahara’s face, as he knew exactly what those *flowers* were. Just the other day, an archbishop of the Tzardom had been added to the eerie flowerbed.

“It’s a very militaristic nation,” Yu handed Tahara a stack of documents thicker

than the one she brought over the day before. She seemed to be documenting everything she extracted from the archbishop. Today's docket included detailed information down to the most secretive aspects of the Tzardom of Light.

"Elemental Knights, huh? Each order is 40,000 strong... A grand total of 120,000."

The organization was the largest order of knights on the continent by far. The Tzardom was utilizing the order to expand their forces west while maintaining small battles in the north. There was no doubt that they had one of the most powerful armies on the continent.

"120,000... Now that's a feast," Yu remarked. Neither of them seemed troubled by the number, the thought of which shook the strategists of the Tzardom's neighboring nations. In fact, Yu seemed like she was eyeing a bountiful buffet.

"Then there are the Temple Knights and the two Paladins..." A shadow fell over Tahara as he recalled his encounter with Weeb the other day. Tahara, as someone who preferred to scheme and plot, wanted least of all to deal with the likes of him. Tahara already knew that, the more he plotted to recruit Weeb, the more his heart would drift away from his cause.

"If he is a hindrance to the Secretary, I'll take care of him."

"Can't sign off on that... The people like him too much."

"I'll simply make it so he *never existed*."

Yu had the terrifying skill Propaganda, which had been a skill for the players to hide their information in the game, but had much more varied uses in this world. With the use of rumors and buzzwords, Yu could manipulate information out in the world. She had simply refrained from using the skill thus far because it could have backfired if they didn't completely understand the mechanisms of this world.

Tahara answered, "No matter how many times you blot out the sun, it'll rise again in the morning."

"What? Is that supposed to be some kind of riddle?" Yu demanded coldly. Tahara ignored her and leisurely hit his cigarette. She scowled in return. "You're

in a hospital, in case you've forgotten."

"Huh? The Secretary smokes this place up like a chimney."

"Don't put the Secretary's smoking and yours in the same realms of existence!"

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Yours is just...unpleasant."

"Unpleasant, my ass! *You're* concerned about what goes in a hospital? Now, that's a laugh! What about your creepy labs and *flowerbeds*?! This is a *slaughterhouse*, let's call it what it is!"

"Oh my... Looks like you might need some brain surgery..."

Even as they bickered, they didn't forget to round up their documents to prepare for the next day, when there would be a formal meeting of the Demon Lord's army.

—The next day.

Yu and Tahara were in the office within the Hot Springs Resort organizing documents. The room contained an executive desk meant for the owner of the establishment, a genuine leather couch for guests, and even a tropical aquarium tank.

The pair quietly continued their work in silence, accompanied by an array of flowers displayed all around the executive desk. The vibrant arrangement of flowers in vases was coordinated around the color purple, and it seemed to make Tahara a bit uncomfortable. He could feel some dark feeling curdling in his gut. The flowers had become even more vibrant than before, almost blindingly so, suggesting that Yu has been making regular *modifications*. Perhaps the essence of evil was the best fertilizer after all.

Finally, Tahara couldn't take any more of it. "Dammit! How am I supposed to concentrate in this *greenhouse*?!"

"Watch your mouth," Yu jabbed. "I didn't grow these flowers for you."

"You better not have!"

Tahara spoke no more after that, as the flowers seemed to him to groan and lament in the faintest whispers.

Then, the Demon Lord entered with a deep furrow on his brow, exuding an aura that warned his advisors to consider their words before speaking to him. He seemed to be dreading the incoming barrage of suggestions, comments, and misunderstandings from his advisors who far outsmarted him. Even before the meeting began, there was a sharp pain in his stomach. (Did I screw up by taking the leash off of Akane? But she could have made things so much more confusing... What was I supposed to do?) Then, he suddenly noticed the array of colorful flowers around the room.

“What is this...?”

“I took the liberty of decorating the room,” Yu pounced, “With a palette of your favorite colors, Mister Secretary.”

“Impressive... It makes the space very calming,” the Demon Lord smiled.

“Thank you, Sir!” Yu answered gleefully.

It was Tahara’s turn to frown. It wasn’t even funny to hear the Demon Lord say that a room full of these flowers was ‘calming.’ To Tahara, it seemed like his work environment was becoming more hostile by the day.

The Demon Lord sat in the desk chair, and the purplish flowers glowed even more venomously, as if to accentuate the darkness about him. “I never had much interest in flowers,” he said, “but this is changing my mind. There’s something quite exceptional about these, knowing that you grew them, Yu.”

“Mister Secretary...”

The conversation made Tahara want to cover his ears. He felt the urge to press an HR rep for how his workplace could have fallen this far. This was like working in a haunted house alongside real ghosts.

“H-Hey, Boss,” he interjected. “Hate to interrupt the gardening sesh, but could we move on to our agenda?”

“Mm.” The Demon Lord nodded, running his finger along the petals of a flower near him. He then placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, completing

his usual look. The council commenced. “I’ll start by catching you up on my end.” Having apparently rehearsed the speech, the Demon Lord went on to list the recent series of events, from meeting Olgan to what took place in Animanía and Hellion territory. Despite his matter-of-fact tone, this was an incredible tale to his advisors. He had somehow taken in the pair of Star Players, two of the best adventurers on the continent, used some of the Anima to his advantage, and invaded Hellion lands. Belphegor, on the receiving end of the invasion, had his entire territory trampled by the apes, and his castle blown to smithereens. Not even an all-out war could have caused this much damage, and the aftermath of the invasion made it seem like a natural disaster had come and gone. To top it all off, the Demon Lord had acquired a very useful asset in the form of the refugee princess.

Hearing these events in sequence, the advisors could consider no other explanation than the Demon Lord having planned it all out in his brilliance.

Tahara puffed some cigarette smoke. “You can’t *help* pitching a perfect game, can you, Sir? It’s getting really sleepy in the outfield,” he joked. And it was only natural for Tahara to have this impression. He had made connections with Anima, brought home a princess in his pocket, and recruited Star Players to his side. The simple yet effective repetition of striking down enemies and seeking out potential allies had begun to snowball, compounding the strength of the Demon Lord’s army with every move he made.

“Merely a tea-time game for the Secretary,” Yu chimed in.

“Not too amusing for our opponents, though!” Tahara laughed, prompting a smile from Yu.

The Demon Lord, on the other hand, was secretly steaming, (No, you’ve got it all wrong! I just went out there for some anti-magic item...!) That simple catalyst had led to excessively impressive results. Before the barrage of undeserved praise from his advisors grew out of control, the Demon Lord solemnly laid out the two things he had acquired on the desk: a pair of rare items called Amanda’s Stone and Amanda’s Seed. The former prevented a certain degree of status conditions while the latter temporarily boosted MP. “These are the anti-magic items I could get my hands on.”

His advisors acknowledged them with reverence. They seemed to have a thought or two about the blatant existence of magic in this world.

“Speaking of magic, Mister Secretary, my lab coat seems to prevent status conditions. I’ve conducted some experiments, with Luna’s assistance,” Yu handed him a report.

The Demon Lord pondered, reading through the report. (Come to think of it, I wrote that into Yu’s lab coat... ‘Prevent all status conditions,’ or something like that. Didn’t seem right for the best doctor in the world to get a status condition.) In the game, there were numerous status conditions like Poisoned or Paralyzed that affected characters. (On top of that, it apparently prevents most damage from class-2 spells...) While the Demon Lord had no means of seeing his advisors’ stats, Yu already had an impressive Magic Defense of 20. Considering that Mikan, a top-tier attacker, had a Magic Defense of 10 after accounting for her armor, and Yukikaze had a Magic Defense of 30, Yu’s stat was definitely significant.

“This seed is yours for now, Tahara. Don’t hesitate to use it if you have to.”

“Sweet! Magic seems like a whole can of worms, so I thought my best shot’d just be to draw first.”

“Yu, use your connections with noble patients and the Madam to find as many of these items as possible. Behind closed doors, of course.”

“Understood, Sir.” Yu nodded, agreeing that publicly calling for anti-magic items would work out as well for them as walking around with a big red target on their backs.

Then, the Demon Lord went on to explain what happened in the depths of the Bastille Dungeon.

“‘Let’s play,’ huh...? Someone’s got a death wish, eh, Boss?”

Yu glared at Tahara for this. “It’s not funny. Who knows what lowly, miserable, worthless scum it was, but we need to hunt it down and exterminate it. Now.”

“That’s exactly why the Secretary’s *preparing* for that.” Tahara understood the current plan of the Demon Lord to be expanding their territory and

solidifying their base of operations, while amassing a collection of anti-magic items. “Any guesses on who that was, Chief?” Tahara asked, apparently intrigued by the mysterious figure in the dungeon.

“It’s anyone’s guess. I don’t recall making any enemies.”

Tahara burst out laughing. “I’m sure *they* won’t see it that way!”

(What does he think I did?! Well, I guess my record hasn’t been *entirely* clean...) Back in the Empire, Hakuto Kunai had created too many political enemies to count. Tahara looked at him as if to say ‘what’d you expect?’ Feeling rather hurt by the assumption that he was some big bad villain, the Demon Lord changed the subject to affairs within Holylight.

“Can you take a look at this first, Chief?” Tahara interjected.

“Hm...” The Demon Lord took the document that was handed to him. The packet outlined the current power dynamic in Holylight, the change in number of workers, their salaries, logistics of their commute and meals, and so much more in great detail. The Demon Lord felt a dizzy spell at the assault of words and numbers from those pages.

“Word o’ mouth’s spread as much as it can. Thinking about throwing up a barrack or something, especially now that we’ve got more working hands on deck. Thanks to you, Sir.”

“Hm...”

“The village is getting pretty cramped, and fast. Lately, I’ve been inviting the neighbors over,” Tahara grinned, adding subtext to his remark.

Yu looked at him with reproach. “You’ve been feeding the dogs a lot.”

“You make me sound *diabolical* or something. I’m just showing them around the village out of the goodness of my heart. With a barrel full of water for them to take home.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s called *kindness*, for your information. It just happens that they are moved by our kindness and start going on about how jealous they are of our prosperous village,” Tahara said with a dramatic flair as he puffed his cigarette.

After all, eastern Holylight was a wasteland, detested by the rest of the country. The neighboring villagers must have shaken, in disbelief as they experienced the current state of Rabbi.

“Then we should incorporate those neighboring villages immediately. Managing the *happiness* of the population is one of the Secretary’s primary directives.”

The Department of Citizen Happiness Management was the clunky yet official title given to the Demon Lord and his advisors in their previous world. Yu knew no other way to govern. In fact, she knew no other happiness than living under the rule of the Demon Lord.

“Easier said than done,” Tahara countered. “The folks ruling those villages might have a few things to say about it.”

“We can silence them. Forever. Sew their mouths shut.”

“Or make ‘em *tongue-tied*? You’d actually do it, too...”

The Demon Lord silently groaned at the increasingly violent topic of conversation. His initial intention of improving his reputation had gone out the window, and now he was sounding like a bona fide invader. This was akin to finding oneself on the FBI’s most wanted list upon returning from an overseas business trip. (How could this have happened...?!) He gazed up at the ceiling. As if he was looking for an escape from reality, he let his gaze wander to the tropical fish swimming through the aquarium. They danced through the water elegantly, oblivious to the outside world. (Those fish have it easy... I was staring at fish like this, once before. A long time ago...) The Demon Lord tried to recall the details, but his memories seemed foggy. He decided to simply let his mind wander farther. (Swimming... Swimming... I know! I’ll build a pool! I promised Aku, too!) With his recently restored Admin Feature at the forefront of his mind, the Demon Lord’s spirits were immediately lifted. What could be more luxurious than a pool in eastern Holylight where it was scorching year round? He smiled, perhaps imagining a fun pool day with Aku.

Tragically, his mind was yanked back to reality by Tahara, “Our friendly neighbors... Guess we don’t have to hold back anymore, eh?” He grinned, giving the Demon Lord a look.

The gesture came across as if the two needed no words to communicate, which rubbed Yu the wrong way. “What are you talking about...?” she spat out.

“I’m talking about how Mister Boss Man took advantage of—I mean, had a heart-to-heart with little White.”

Tahara’s grin caused some cold sweat to trickle down the Demon Lord’s back as he thought of the time he accidentally shared a bath with White. (Dammit, who told Tahara...? And how much does he know?!) As the Demon Lord was secretly freaking out, Yu went silent, deep in thought. Of course, Tahara had heard of the incident from the Madam, including how the Demon Lord had given the Angel’s Ring to White. Tahara considered that a shot through White’s heart.

“Been busy flying around, eh, Chief?”

From Tahara’s point of view, the Demon Lord had made the top Holy Maiden fall head over heels for him, like he was some manther, before storming off to the north and the east to make some noise. This seemed like Kunai’s tactic to a tee, shrewdly switching off between pacification and brutality.

Despite his internal freak-out, the Demon Lord lit his cigarette with gravitas, and started in a convincing tone, “It is best, in any world and any time, to have a cordial relationship with those in power.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

‘Cordial’ was an understatement, as they had shared a bath naked. The Demon Lord’s attempt at concealing the fact would have made even a politician blush.

“Never gets old being impressed by your handiwork, Chief.”

“That’s high praise... How do you see where I stand, Tahara?” The Demon Lord pushed aside his fear to finally ask Tahara’s perception of him, in a desperate attempt to resolve any misunderstandings between them that he could.

Tahara cruelly replied, “What do you mean, ‘how’? The first thing you did was lure Luna into your clutches, setting yourself up as her guardian. You got your hands on Rabbi for close to nothing, and, the unyielding conqueror that you

are, started reaching your devilish claws into neighboring lands.”

“There’s a huge misunderstanding here,” the Demon Lord croaked.

Tahara followed up, however, by speaking directly into his mind. *Yeah, yeah, of course! You want to set Yu on the right foot today. I got you, Chief.*

(Oh, no... What the hell is he talking about?! Do I need to get an *interpreter*?!)

Watching the Demon Lord remain silent, Tahara nodded, much to the Demon Lord’s annoyance, with a knowing smirk. As far as Tahara was concerned, the Demon Lord was determined to curtail Yu’s philosophy of killing their way through every obstacle. If killing solved every problem, the Empire would not have fallen as it did.

Tahara eloquently paraphrased the Demon Lord’s strategy as he understood it. “My bad, my bad, that’s not the *complete* version, is it? The important part’s where you’ve got the Madam wrapped around your finger, and had the high society nobles make up with the military nobles. Without a single drop of blood, you’ve restructured the entire power dynamic of the country. Used to take lots of bloodshed and loads of money to reach a reconciliation like that. That would have given the people a usurper dripping with blood and coin.”

“Hm...”

“But not this time. You set it all up without a single drop of blood. Thanks to that, Luna’s got a clean reputation too, doesn’t she? Public perception’s the one thing you can’t buy with gold. A ruler’s doomed once they give off a rotten impression.”

“That’s absolutely right...” the Demon Lord muttered, after quietly waiting for Tahara’s storm of an interpretation to end. The nerve-calming cigarette between his lips was the last line of defense for his sanity. (What *reconciliation*...? I had nothing to do with that!) Despite the Demon Lord’s internal scream, the power dynamic of Holylight had actually changed overnight, making this nothing short of a miraculous political endeavor. A reconciliation between the Madam and Harts via any other method would have been almost impossibly complicated. Of course, the Demon Lord felt like he had returned from out of town to his house having been completely remodeled without his knowledge. It was out of the blue, to say the least.

“You sprang a trap against the leader of the nobles—that the people hate—with a *music box*, and he fell right for it. The leader of the Holy Maidens ain’t unfriendly towards us now, either,” Tahara rattled off and blew a cloud of smoke with satisfaction. He seemed incredibly impressed at his boss’s meticulously crafted master plan. Despite starting out in this world with zero foundation, he had found solid ground, was rapidly expanding their forces, and steadily gearing up to take over the country and eliminate any opposing forces. Anyone else would have been just as impressed as Tahara was.

(This is unreal... I’m being treated like someone who’s accomplished a *feat*, when I haven’t done a single thing!) The Demon Lord shuddered at the growing mountain of misunderstandings that had piled up before him. He felt that, if he were to touch on any of these in an attempt to remedy even one of them, the whole house of cards would come crashing down on him.

Yu seemed to have picked up what Tahara was putting down. “I understand the Secretary’s long-term objectives...”

“Good to hear. Your medical practice is the driving factor in growing our popularity among the poor. You can’t be the one to step out of line, here,” Tahara plainly explained. Yu sighed in acknowledgment. More than anything, she wanted to avoid the Demon Lord thinking that she was short-sighted. Seeing that Yu understood his point, Tahara turned back to the Demon Lord to summarize their current state of affairs. “Right now, we’re giving work to those who need it, pouring the funds we get from the Madam into all sorts of industries. It’s slow and steady, but some merchant and production groups started knocking on our door.” Politically, he had taken in the Holy Maidens and convinced two major noble factions to reconcile, while socially he was appealing to the laborers, merchants, and producers. All in all, it was a brilliant coup, considering there had been close to no bloodshed until this point. “Gifting the Holy Maiden an Angel’s Ring. Now that’s delicious irony, Chief.” The Demon Lord of the Empire creating an angel... The irony was certainly not lost on Tahara, but Yu was preoccupied with another thought.

“Gifting the Holy Maiden... Sir?”

While the Demon Lord could not read her expression as she stared at the floor, he sensed an inexplicable pressure. Letting his eyes wander to the

aquarium again, the Demon Lord tried to sound as nonchalant as possible. “A small token for getting to know each other.”

“Getting to know each other...” Yu parroted, prompting a drop of sweat to trickle down the Demon Lord’s back.

“Speaking of...” Tahara started cheerfully.

The Demon Lord shot him an expecting look, hoping for his genius advisor to clear the tension in the air. (Good work, Tahara! Now’s the time to let your ‘genius’ backstory shine!)

Alas, Tahara followed up with a cruel suggestion. “Speaking of gifts, I’d love for you to get Yu something, too.”

The Demon Lord heartily nodded. Unbeknownst to him, he had just dug his own grave. “I was just thinking the same thing. Yu, your great work certainly deserves a reward.” He had promised Tahara a big reward, after all: his sister. Leaving Yu high and dry did seem unfair. After sensing a foreboding air about her, the Demon Lord was quick to jump on the suggestion. (Wasn’t it like this with White, too...?) He recalled how he had given White the Angel’s Ring to make her feel better. More recently, he had done the same with Olgan when he gave her the Devilish Horns. He had created an angel here and a devil there, just to get out of an awkward situation. This tendency of his made for a rather dangerous pattern. (A gift is a small price to pay to cheer her up...) the Demon Lord thought conclusively and leaned back into his chair, confident that he could prepare any gift Yu wanted.

“Then why don’t you take a break, Boss, and have a nice soak in the hot springs with Yu? Have her wash your back or something, eh?” Tahara struck the nail into the coffin.

(Wh-What the...?!) The Demon Lord nearly fell out of his chair from surprise, but managed to compose himself. He had expected to give her some sort of item from the game; the last thing he expected was for *him* to become the gift.

“You gotta be tired, Chief, after all the overtime you put in. Time for some R ‘n’ R, don’t you think?”

(Are you nuts?! ‘R and R’ would stand for Rattled and Restless!) The Demon

Lord's mind began to rattle at the catastrophic suggestion.

Tahara ruthlessly followed up via a direct Communication, *Yu's a ticking time bomb right now. Thought that was a sweet tee-up if I do say so myself. What'd you think, Chief?*

(That was some friendly fire! A headshot, at that!) The Demon Lord wanted very badly to protest, but relented, given that he had basically just set himself up. Still, the desperate man tried to wriggle his way out of this predicament. "Wait, Tahara... *Ordering* a woman to wash my back would definitely be classified as sexual har—"

"A splendid idea, Tahara...!" Yu cheered, drowning out the Demon Lord's feeble protest. Overjoyed, Yu gave Tahara a beaming smile. "You are helplessly stupid, lazy, and *musky*, not to mention dysfunctional and incestuous, but color me impressed."

Tahara twitched at the comment, but managed to force a smile over it. He knew full well how dangerous Yu could be if she were to be properly enraged. As far as Tahara was concerned, some simple alone time with the Secretary was a dirt-cheap price to pay to keep Yu happy.

(Wh-What can I do...?! I'm heading up a creek without a paddle!) The Demon Lord's cogs were turning fast. While he might have been happy with the idea of sharing a bath with someone as beautiful as Yu, he knew better than anyone how terrifying she could be. He was the one who wrote all of her backstory, after all. That being said, he had never written any chemistry between Hakuto Kunai and Yu beyond a strictly business relationship. The sense of going off script only added to the Demon Lord's dread. "We'll settle on a day off when we get things settled," he said. "There's something I need to share with you first." If one thing was certain, it was that the Demon Lord did not give up easily. He pulled the ace from his sleeve in one final attempt to clear the air. "I plan to summon two more advisors to this world in the near future. I have my thoughts as to who, but I want your honest input on this."

The air in the room did change. Both Yu and Tahara knew that this was a serious matter. Yu was the first to speak out, "I recommend Shizuka, Sir."

"Hey, hey, hey! What do we want with that pseudo-Terminator?! Unless you

want to make this world a post-apocalyptic wasteland.”

Shizuka Matoba. Those who knew the name shuddered to hear it. Her backstory depicted her as a serial killer for the history books, the one who sent the capital of the Empire into panic. Shizuka had a very detailed history, which concluded as follows: “She is secretly determined to kill Hakuto Kunai to avenge her capture.”

As Tahara and Yu were unaware of such detail, they were engaged in a heated debate.

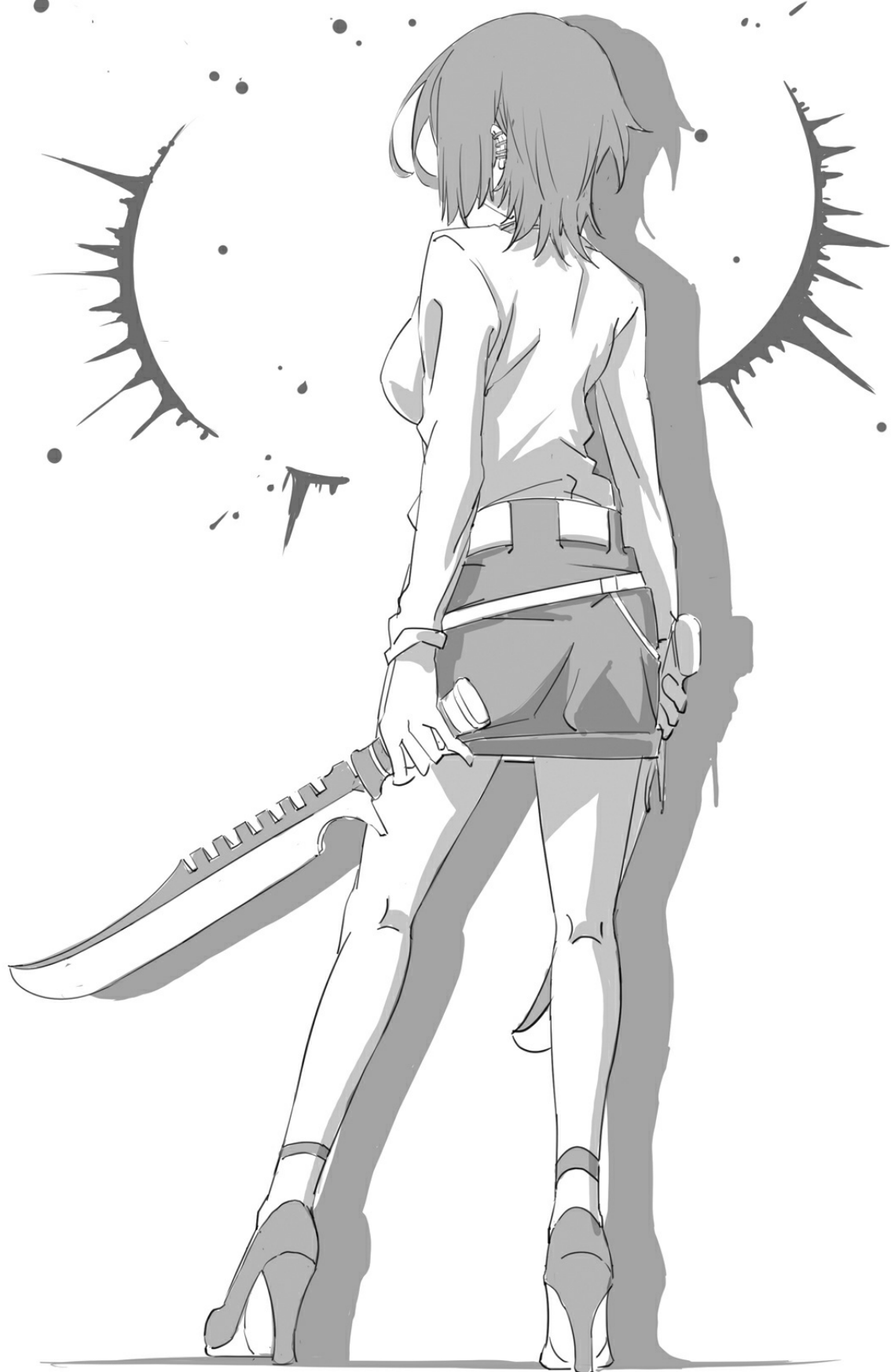
“Just like the Secretary said, we’re only going to make more enemies. We need someone like her who knows how to fight and won’t back down from anything.”

“That’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard... You think she’s gonna listen to *anybody* in a world without the Empire?!”

“You’re dumb. The Empire is being rebuilt from scratch by the Secretary himself.”

“I’m saying we’ve got to wait until we build a fence to keep the beast in. Otherwise, she’d tear up the country from the inside out.”

The Demon Lord pondered as he listened to the argument. While Shizuka was as beautiful as a sharpened katana, she was an uncontrollable berserker on the inside.



Considering the mysterious figure that sent him the eerie message in the Bastille Dungeon, the Demon Lord couldn't deny that he might need her raw strength down the line. But, he was sure that now wasn't the right time. (We've barely got our engine running. Better take things slow.) He considered the village of Rabbi to be a chick that had just hatched from an egg he had been warming for a long time. One wrong move, and the little chicklet would be eaten alive.

Meanwhile, Tahara kept voicing his suggestions. "My vote's for Nomura. Uncle Nom. Kondo's got the silver medal. I'm thinking about the security of the village, now that we're about to expand."

"They would be better at defense."

"In any case, Ren's a shoo-in. That'd be a great help to me."

"Oh? I think Kato would liven this place up. Well suited for taking out our enemies."

"Kato. We'd need a fence for that thoughtless brat too." Tahara facepalmed. He seemed to be lamenting how the majority of his colleagues were so difficult to handle.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was organizing his own thoughts. (Long story short, Tahara's concerned with defense while Yu's thinking of offense...) He could fortify protections around his chicklet, or shove the thing out of the nest to spread its wings and fly high into the sky where no one could reach it. There were arguments to be made for either side, with no clear cut answer. This seemed like a situation where the right answer could only be found in hindsight. "You both made valid arguments..." The Demon Lord solemnly declared, silencing the advisors at once. He seemed ready to announce which two he was going to summon. "Considering our rapidly growing village, I want to keep Kondo stationed here, almost permanently." The statement was met by nods of approval by the advisors. Kondo, who was agoraphobic, would do so without any prompting. Akira Ono had designed him as such. The Demon Lord expected him to become the optimal security chief without a word of complaint. Then, if any intruders were to come near the village, they would have nowhere to run from Kondo's eyes. "I will be spending more time out of the country," the

Demon Lord added. “I intended to summon Ren as my bodyguard.”

Tahara threw his fists into the air, clearly excited to have a level-minded colleague join the fray. “Now we’re talking! Ren would be a *huge* help around here! Take half of my duties, at least!”

Unsurprisingly, discontent flashed over Yu’s expression for a moment, but she managed to swallow any objection she might have had. “I have no objections, Sir...” Since the Demon Lord had chosen his new advisors with an emphasis on defense, she looked ready to take care of the offense herself.

“I have other powers unlocked, too. I’ll get to those.” Seeing that his advisors heard him, the Demon Lord closed his eyes as if to announce the dismissal of their council. He was certainly relieved to finally get away from the stomachache-inducing meeting, but he kept his expression hardened. At the same time, he began thinking about his newly unlocked powers. (That Still Angel seemed to expect Kunai to annihilate this world...)

—Congratulations!

You’ve reached a milestone through actions taken within the current map — Unlocked Area Construction.

(Whoever’s sending me this thinks this is a game...) The Demon Lord guessed that whoever this was, it wasn’t the Still Angel who had summoned him. If they wanted him to destroy this world, they would have never limited his features. (But what do I care what *they* think?) The Demon Lord opened the admin screen and perused the selection of Areas to construct. Most Areas were still blocked off, but he expected each area to unlock at certain thresholds.

—Play with me, Demon Lord.

The infuriating message from the dungeon appeared in his mind again. Still, the Demon Lord couldn’t help but wear a savage grin as he took in the list of nostalgic Areas. (I’ll play with you, all right. Have fun with your god complex until then, dumbass...) The Demon Lord’s dauntless grin was frozen by the words he heard next.

“Mister Secretary. I’ll be eagerly awaiting your invitation...to the hot springs.” With a stunning smile, Yu quietly closed the door as she left.

Now left alone, the Demon Lord's grin had fallen, color drained from his face. (You've got to be kidding me! I thought I'd swept that whole thing under the rug!) The Demon Lord collapsed onto the desk, shaking. Despite the prospects of sharing a bath with a gorgeous woman, he couldn't help but picture a bloodbath.

Redecorating

Mornings started early in the village of Rabbi. The Bunnies left their houses before dawn and headed out to the fields. The craftsmen who answered the wanted ads, as well as the adventures who had no other jobs while the Northern Nations were in war season, got to work early in an attempt to get as much done as possible before the air became too hot. At the same time, the shops that adorned the streets of the Common District stocked their shelves. As the village of Rabbi was in full swing by five in the morning, the shopkeepers usually woke at three, getting ready bright and early.

“A black loaf and carrot soup, please.”

“A raging chicken skewer and sautéed carrots for me. And a boiled egg.”

“Got to make it last ’til lunch. Got some wheat soup?”

Since Holylight was exceedingly warm throughout the year, the working hours in Rabbi were mostly limited from dawn until high noon.

“Heard a new pub’s going up.”

“Rumors say it’s a second location of Kanpai.”

“We’ll get Kanpai food here? This place is insane...”

While the rest of eastern Holylight was desolate, the large population of Rabbi made for a bustling shopping district.

“Check out this pair! Slime Jelly in the soles! Won’t get any holes in it, either!”

“You won’t believe what this is! It’s grizzly liver from the City States.”

“Green peas! Great for snacking! Wanna try a pod?”

“Blackened Sand Lizard, coming right up! This thing packs just the kick to pick you up in the morning!”

The shopkeepers shouted over each other, eager to make their sales. Amazingly, this district charged them no rent and didn’t tax them on any sales.

In a sense, their livelihoods were at stake. If they were to be kicked out of their spot, they were back to the miserable conditions of the wasteland. Tahara had notified all shopkeepers that shops with unsatisfactory performance or bad reviews would be swiftly evicted, and had stayed true to his word. Of course, there was no other place on the continent where these shopkeepers could set up with no rent or tax. As a result, the Common District established for the day laborers was always in a cacophony first thing in the morning. Furthermore, as Tahara had hoped, every shop was striving to improve the quality of their products and maintain a good reputation. A form of brutal capitalism was in place, his way of sifting through the sketchier shopkeepers.

“How far’s this village going to spread, anyway?”

“How should I know?”

“The roads are ridiculously wide. You can barely put any buildings up like this.”

In fact, the roads the laborers were laying out were ridiculously wide, enough for four large carriages to ride side-by-side. Moreover, there were crossroads every now and again, suggesting a design for something incredibly large scale. The laborers had no way of knowing what they were building.

“It’s almost time, let’s go!”

“We’re still early, aren’t we?”

“Grand Foreman said to be there five minutes early!”

The laborers chowed down their breakfast and rushed to their posts. Strangely enough, none of them wore the tell-tale ‘pre-shift gloom’ on their faces. This had to do with them being paid for the day’s labor on the same day. Ordinarily, as adventurers were notorious for ghosting day jobs, they were paid at the end of the month. For those who struggled to put food on the table during off-season, a daily pay schedule was a saving grace. While young women and well-endowed men could survive those dry times by offering nighttime services, others were forced to literally do anything to survive. The Demon Lord had adapted the system he saw in action at the dungeon.

“All right, let’s get some work done.”

“Wait for me, dear Bronze Coin!”

A pair of laborers were heading to their post. One was of strong stature and wore rags, while the other was slender and cleanly put together.

“You’ll use that coin up by tomorrow.”

“I did order new clothes, shoes, and even a belt. I’m changing things up a little.” The man was decently dressed for an adventurer. His belt was made of brand new leather, and his shoes contained chilled, rubber-like Slime Jelly in the soles.

“New shoes, huh...? Don’t you think you’re over your head?”

“When I wear these, I feel this...bounce? I don’t feel as sore.”

“Exactly. That’s frivolous, don’t you think?”

The workers, who used to wear clothes until they could no longer be stitched together and wore shoes until they fell to pieces, were now beginning to buy newer things. In the past, all they could afford was enough water and food to get by. They would have never bought any clothes or shoes unless they desperately had to.

“A pair of shoes can make a big difference. Not just for your body, but for your *spirit*.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

People spending money and purchasing goods was a simple yet vital concept to form an economy, the foundation of any nation. If no one could afford to spend money, the economy (and subsequently the entire country) would collapse. The Demon Lord had set up the daily salary schedule for the simple reason that most of the laborers looked poor, but the effect of the system had been both subtle and significant. He had managed to give the working class quick access to money. At the end of each day, pay was handed out to the laborers, who cheered in joy. What’s more, this continued day after day, week after week... In a strange way, this led to stability among their workforce. In addition to financial stability, this had drastically lowered the amount of people who resorted to Satanism.

This adventurer pair was no exception. Who knew what might have happened to them if they had never found their way to the village of Rabbi?

“You keep ragging on my new clothes, but I’m sure you’ve saved up enough to buy yourself a new wardrobe.”

“Well, yeah...”

“If you keep wearing those rags, your soul will get cold. You know you’ll get paid today. And tomorrow. And the day after that... Do you *want* Aku to see you in that filth?”

“Dammit, fine...! Don’t you think I want a decent set of clothes, too?!”

“I’m more into Tron than Aku, though.”

“No one asked.”

As the laborers jogged to their posts, peace momentarily returned to the Common District. But for the shopkeepers, their day was far from over. In the afternoon, the drove of laborers would return again, causing another rush. The village of Rabbi, for many merchants, had become a war zone of its own.

—As the sun rose and shone full force on the land...

“That about does it. We’ll leave the rest for the afternoon,” a supervising foreman declared, followed by his fellow foremen issuing similar statements to their workers. The laborers clamored to the wooden barrels that lined the streets before chugging wooden cups full of water. In lavish extravagance, there were metal basins filled to the brim with water, solely for wetting their towels.

“We’re using it like it’s nothing... But this *is* water, right?”

“Huh?”

“Same goes for the salt, but, y’know... It’s because they’re *free*...”

“Seriously, right?”

Having workers fall ill from dehydration was simply a loss of labor from Tahara’s perspective. This was precisely why he had set up stations with ample water and salt (brought over from the resort) near break areas, and always nagged them about taking enough. On that note, there was a good reason why

Tahara had agreed to the pay-by-the-day salary system. This led to most of the workers spending their earnings in the village at various establishments like shops on the street, bars, inns, or the public bath. With more variety in entertainment like casinos and brothels, this trend would only accelerate. In a sense, the workers were giving their earnings back to their boss. The village of Rabbi was almost already too big to be called a village, but the larger their territory grew and the more entertainment attractions they could build, the more return they could expect on investing in their workers.

“H-Hey, look...!”

“Uh...”

Three figures were walking by the adventurers and craftsmen on their breaks, heading in the direction of the village center: Tahara the Grand Foreman; the Divine Doctor Yu, who now garnered adoring looks from laborers and patients alike; and the Demon Lord, the man with an otherworldly presence who kept them both at his side. Although Yu and Tahara had spent much time with the residents and workers of the village, earning their respect and trust, their auras seemed to shift when they were around the Demon Lord. It was reminiscent of the Empire’s Demon Lord, strolling through an occupied area with his advisors.

Both the clamoring laborers and the nagging foremen hushed their voices.

“It-It’s been a while since I’ve seen the Demon Lord...”

“As intimidating as always... You know, I can’t stop shaking when I look at him.”

“Be that as it may, we wouldn’t have a livelihood without him anymore.”

“I heard that the Demon Lord was the one who built that crazy bathhouse.”

“I heard a rumor that he burned a Hydra to death in Rookie. Laughed while he did it, too...”

“Don’t let him hear you say that. He’ll tear you to shreds!”

“Mama... Mama Yu... Mam—Wahhhhhh!”

“Shut the hell up!”

At this point, the Demon Lord simply needed to stroll through the village to

cause chaos. This was nothing short of torturous for him, walking through the peering eyes of everyone in the village. As the crowd watched with bated breath, the trio arrived at a plot that was (intentionally, everyone assumed) left vacant. The Demon Lord produced from the void two items to create a Base.

“Let’s begin... Evolve Base!” The Demon Lord threw one of the items, Holy Water, into the air above the plot. The ball of light morphed mid-air into an unexpected appearance. The crowd began to mutter in bewilderment.

“It can’t be...”

“Am I...dreaming?”

A woman clad all in white materialized, with the looks and aura of a bona fide angel. The woman carried a great pitcher on her shoulder, and divine water poured from it onto the shriveled soil. With a bright flash, an Evolved Base called a Fountain of Healing was formed. At the same time, shocked muttering spread through the masses, followed by sporadic cries.

“A-An angel...?”

“Th-That dried up plot’s all flooded...!”

“What am I seeing?!”

While the fountain was an awe-inspiring sight for those of this world, it was nothing extraordinary by modern-day standards. The statue was merely based on the popular depiction of Aquarius. The crowd had witnessed an angel come down from the sky and turn a plot of dried land into a wellspring, while the Demon Lord only saw a familiar visual effect that played every time this base was created in the Game. Of course, the same went for the advisors.

“Thanks, Boss. Now we don’t have to lug it over from the resort.”

“Hm. Allow the residents and laborers free access. However, strictly forbid them from taking water out of the village. It will only invite trouble.”

“I second that. We don’t want to shake up the economy yet,” Tahara gave him a meaningful look.

(Yet...?) The Demon Lord returned a nod of feigned understanding.

The base had the properties to heal its user when they were engaged in

combat in its vicinity, but had no effects on anyone else, other than being a fountain of immaculate, divine water. Divine, and not “holy,” because it obviously held no blessings of any Angel or other entity of the Holy element. The only description of the Base was a ridiculous one, which claimed it infinitely produced mountain water from the Southern Alps. Just like Fuji Water that had seen the light of day in Hellion territory, this water had a hidden property of accentuating the tastes of drinks and dishes, which was sure to be more appreciated here than the fountain’s intended purpose.

Meanwhile, this construction was causing another misunderstanding to spread through the crowd... If this could still be called a misunderstanding.

“Th-The angel created a fountain!”

“It-It’s got to be a magic spell, right...? Like a class-7 or -8 that no one’s seen?!”

“This isn’t happening...”

“I did hear, one time...that ‘Demon Lord’ is what they call the Fallen Angel...”

“Lord... Lucifer...?”

As the crowd muttered on, the Demon Lord prepared to set up another Evolved Base, the Forest of Restoration. This too carried a marvelous effect for the residents. The Demon Lord placed a short tree, a Sapling of Restoration, into the ground. With a flash, the tree rapidly grew, multiplying and expanding into a forest that covered the barren soil. Suddenly, a beautiful wood had sprung up between the Hot Springs Resort and Field Hospital, giving the village a more refined aesthetic. The Fountain of Healing was now surrounded by palm trees that matched the scorching climate.

The crowd blurted out in awe at the sudden appearance of a forest.

“Whoa whoa whoa! Now trees grew out of the ground!”

“I don’t know what’s happening anymore.”

“The Demon Lord...shapes the earth with his own hands.”

It was only natural for the crowd to be astonished, especially after witnessing a fountain and a forest materialize out of thin air. Who else but a higher being

like a god or angel could have performed such a feat? When it came to his god-like powers, the crowd's perception of the Demon Lord was no longer a misunderstanding, but an accurate assessment.

“Direct any overflow patients here, Yu, and tell them to rest in the woods.”

“Thank you, Mister Secretary.”

As its name suggested, the forest had restorative properties. It healed injuries over time in the Game, which would translate into all kinds of different effects in this world. All sorts of ailments like broken bones, cuts, back pain, and joint pain would be healed over time.

Finally, the Demon Lord headed to the far end of the village, ready to perform his biggest miracle of the day. Without a second thought, the entire crowd followed as if they were longing to watch another miracle performed by a holy man.

Once at the location, the Demon Lord produced a Game Pass, the item required to evolve the Base he had in mind: the Casino. Tahara's eyes gleamed, as Yu sighed in exasperation.

“Let it rain gold on this land... Evolve Base!” The Demon Lord gave a dramatic wave, and a grand casino hotel materialized, to the amazement of all who looked on. Akira Ono had designed the construction based on the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas. While the Bellagio was an enormous hotel at 36 stories, the base stood at the still-considerable height of 14 stories. Floors 1 through 3 held the casino, restaurants, and theater, while floors 4 through 13 served as a luxury hotel. A penthouse topped off the lavish building as the 14th floor. The front of the casino held a man-made lagoon, where fountains would dance to the music, although the water was completely still at the moment. Once a fountain show began, they would be speechless at seeing the most precious resource in Holylight used like a decoration.

Tahara whistled at the sight. “Finally! Now we're talking!” Tahara was, by nature, a man of impulse, far from a functional adult. Of course, he partook in most forms of gambling.

While Yu wasn't interested in gambling herself, she let out a charmed mutter at the architectural beauty of the building. “I'm sure it will be even more lavish

at night, Mister Secretary...”

“In-Indeed...”

Yu had wrapped her arm around the Demon Lord, pulling herself as close to him as she could. In fact, the Casino Hotel was nothing less than the epitome of extravagance. Numerous light fixtures caused the entirety of the building to let off a mystical amber glow, as if it was reflecting the midday sun. Colored lighting would layer onto the current aesthetic once the sun went down, enveloping the facility in indescribable opulence.

“Employee training’s at the top of the list now. Our Bunnies wouldn’t shine brighter anywhere else. Don’t tell me you’ve had this planned from the start, Chief?” Tahara jokingly suggested, to which the Demon Lord simply curled his lips. He didn’t know what to say, but his expression was enough to make a person assume all sorts of possibilities. Silence was golden indeed. Tahara continued, still looking up at the casino, impressed. “Nobles’ve been squeezing coins out of the people of this country for a millennium strong. So many of them can live day to day, no worries or problems. There’s a class divide here alright, and it’s *deep*.”

The Demon Lord nodded in full agreement, recalling how wide the class divide had gotten in modern-day Japan. This was a topic that hit home after living through the inflation, the economic bubble burst, and rampant unemployment followed by the rise of independent contracting.

Meanwhile, Tahara passionately continued, “Peasants can barely get an education, and the nobles take any business that shows a glimpse of success. Of course the quality of life isn’t rising, nor is the country improving. Any nation that can’t provide hope for the future falls behind. Before you know it, it becomes stagnant before completely breaking down.”

“Does your self-evident rambling have a *point*?” Yu irritably interjected. “If you do, get to it.”

“Our boss is gonna shove more money in the pockets of the people than before, using everything at our disposal. Doesn’t matter if they kick, scream, or try to throw it back. Ain’t that right, Chief?”

“That’s an amusing way to put it...” The Demon Lord thinly smiled as Tahara

cackled and lit a cigarette. While they each had their own thoughts, they came off as being on the same page from the start.

Yu didn't find this amusing, of course. She had sensed that the Demon Lord and Tahara were thinking on dangerously similar terms ever since Tahara had arrived in this world. She had been the one who served the Secretary most faithfully in the Empire, but now, she couldn't help but feel a sort of uneasiness at losing that position. She pulled the Demon Lord's arm even closer to her.

Unbothered, Tahara continued to speak, "Can't afford to buy stuff. Can't sell enough to make a decent profit. The nobles drum up an excuse to tax you at every turn, demanding a cut for everything you do. No wonder some of 'em can't see hope for the future and go join those Satanists, or whatever they're called."

The Demon Lord answered in an anatomical metaphor, an attempt to keep Yu from growing more suspicious. "Indeed, the economy of a country is like the blood in our veins. No circulation, and any part of the system can be damaged." In fact, if the blood stopped circulating in an economy, the only thing waiting for the country would be a slow death.

Yu, her arms still curled around his, wore a gentle smile, ambiguous as to whether she was satisfied with the analogy or the fact that she was holding the Demon Lord close.

"So, a bit of a golden transfusion on our part. That kind of blessing will snap grandpa out of a coma." Tahara saw this operation as a ruthless phase of the wealth distribution initiative. Steady work, decent pay, and now entertainment... The positive effects this village's facilities would bring to the people were sure to exponentially increase the popularity of the Demon Lord. How could they not? While this might have come across as a lazy way of governing, simply appeasing the masses with handouts, Tahara thought the people of Holylight deserved some by now. "All the nobles in the heart of the country have been sucking up all the blood, leaving the people that make up the limbs close to rotting."

The Demon Lord put a cigarette in his mouth as Tahara delved into this metaphor, apprehensive of the direction their conversation was heading. (Give

me a break... I'm not getting any of this economic mumbo-jumbo.) Yu immediately produced her lighter, igniting the end of his cigarette.

Leaning into him as if they were newlyweds, Yu glared at Tahara. "Are you trying to talk the Secretary's ears off?"

"Th-This is as good a time as any," the Demon Lord hurriedly interjected. "I want to hear what you have to say, Tahara." He wanted to extract from Tahara a good reason for setting up the casino, since he had none of his own. The best he had so far was that he wanted to drink the fancy drinks in the restaurant and sleep in the lavish penthouse.

"Not only does the Secretary want to garner reputation and support," Tahara answered, "but also to pump some blood into our limbs. Down to the fingertips in poverty."

"Is that true, Mister Secretary?" Yu asked with her brows slightly pinched. She had appreciated him ordering medical treatment of the sheep, since it was aiding her personal research projects, but thought monetary support to be a touch too merciful.

The Demon Lord replied with the usual ostentatious reverence, "Gambling can be a door to both heaven and hell, that has never changed. It can be a reward one minute, but a striking crack of the whip in the next..." He had managed to throw together a sentence that seemed to imply he had been thinking about this.

In fact, he had experienced both sides of the coin himself, through pachinko and slot machines. The statement was a complete platitude, but coming from the mouth of the Demon Lord of the Empire, it carried a sense of threatening persuasiveness.

"I see," Yu muttered with an entranced expression. "Managing the happiness of our citizens... Of course, this is precisely in the Secretary's department."

Seeing that Yu was satisfied, Tahara threw a pebble into the water and watched the ripple spread, as if to foreshadow how the money (or blood, by Tahara's analogy) would spill and spread through the anatomy of the nation, until it came back to the center.

“First thing, we have to spread the coins to the very end of the road. More pocket money, more spending. More spending, better business and production.” Tahara’s explanation was a simplified crash course in economics.

Humans were powerless without money, after all. And enough money could buy almost anything, which perhaps made humans a bizarre species in the eyes of the rest of the animal kingdom. Money was the difference between a full and empty stomach. In fact, excess money enticed many people to eat more extravagant meals. Naturally, some would use their money to drink or stay at a nice inn. Others would have new outfits tailored or new shoes cobbled. Money would enrich and invigorate various industries, making farmers and craftsmen wealthier. The more money that actively circulates through the country, the more people will grow stronger, their lives bettered, and the more they will show support for the ruler who provided them with that enrichment. Considering how the Empire had ruled their occupied territories with an iron fist like the nobles of Holylight were doing now, the Demon Lord could not have made a more contrasting approach.

He wisely met Tahara’s lecture with silence, and Yu followed his lead, thinking about the Demon Lord’s declaration to follow the opposite path of the Empire. The Demon Lord, on the other hand, wanted to demand Tahara tell him how he could have thought so far ahead.

“Remember what you told me before, Boss?”

(Coming again from left field?! Which thing is he talking about?!) The Demon Lord struggled in vain to recall a conversation he had with Tahara that matched the current topic. So, he simply nodded without saying a word.

“Business can’t just be about making money for yourself. It’s about passing on the profit to your partners. That’s how you build *trust*, you said.”

“That...takes me back.”

“Your business of taking over this country couldn’t be going better. Personally, I’m a huge fan of your new policies, Chief.”

(They’re *your* policies...!) Of course, the Demon Lord lacked any foresight to build such a plan. The only objective in Akira Ono’s mind was to regain all of his admin features and control of the world he had created. As uniquely talented of

an artist he was, he didn't have a single political bone in his body.

"The crowd has begun to stir after witnessing your power, Mister Secretary."

The Demon Lord turned around to find a hoard of people crowded around him wearing varied expressions, ranging from shock, respect, fear, and uncertainty, to hope. Some were even kneeling before the "golden temple." His advisors curled their lips, satisfied to see that their plans would be even easier to execute now.

(Just setting up a base made quite a splash...) To the Demon Lord, building a base was as easy as breathing, and wielding any items from the game came as naturally as moving his limbs. However, every move he made and every word he said had been seen as a genius political scheme by his advisors, and worshiped like he was performing miracles by the people. (Can't I do one single thing without everyone acting like...) It was quite the woeful situation for the Demon Lord, but this wouldn't stop him from setting up everything he had created, painting over the entirety of this world with his own shade. While he hadn't a smidgen of talent for governing, he wasn't forgiving enough to lay dormant in someone else's world. No matter what others thought of him or saw in him, he would ultimately follow his own gut.

"Why don't you give the crowd a word or two, Chief?"

(You little...! What am I supposed to say?!) The Demon Lord secretly panicked, before astutely spotting Luna in the crowd, her eyes glimmering with the reflection of the casino, the speechless Eagle at her side. He strode over to Luna and smiled at her. "'Golden' was your epithet, was it not?"

"Huh...? Y-Yeah..." Luna answered.

"This Base shall be a castle becoming of it."

"A castle...becoming of my...?"

The Demon Lord walked back towards the casino without explanation and called, "Tahara, until it's ready, the casino's open to employees only."

"Yessir."

(I'll leave the rest to Luna,) the Demon Lord happily decided. (She's the lady of

the land, after all! This is all part of her job!) He walked away, a solemn mask concealing his contentment. After the Demon Lord had left Luna with cleaning up the mess he had created, the crowd exploded in excitement. It now seemed like the Demon Lord had constructed the Golden Temple just for Luna.

“H-He built this temple...this *miracle*...for Lady Luna?!”

“The Demon Lord and the Holy Maiden, huh...?”

“Look at the size of that thing... He calls that a gift?!”

“This is nuts!”

Luna was stunned for a moment before her true self emerged, beckoned by the astonished cheers of the crowd. She let out a self-important scoff, before puffing her chest and proudly declaring, “That’s right, this is *my* castle! You better worship it up and down!”

The crowd replied, cheering even louder. They saw nothing wrong with Luna’s claim as they gazed up at the grand temple that shimmered in the sun.

“L-Luna... Are you sure you can say things like that?” Eagle whispered, tugging her sleeve.

Of course, Luna took no heed. In fact, she arched her back even more, encouraged by the crowd’s reaction. “I’ll keep a room, even for a servant like you. Be grateful for it!”

“Um, no thanks. This place is scary...”

“Wait... What do you mean, ‘scary’?! This is my castle!”

As Luna shouted, the chatter in the crowd only grew. First a large fountain, then the sudden appearance of a forest, and now a grand temple that shone with golden rays. This seemed nothing short of a series of miracles, the likes of which were only recorded in myths.

While the Demon Lord had performed these with no more care than as if he was redecorating a room, they would be immortalized through the people who witnessed them.

The Village
of Rabbi



Hot Springs Resort

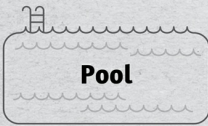


Forest of Restoration

Secret Lair



Field Hospital



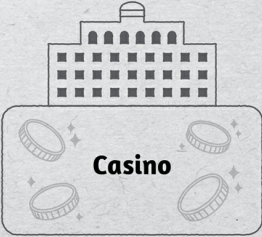
Pool



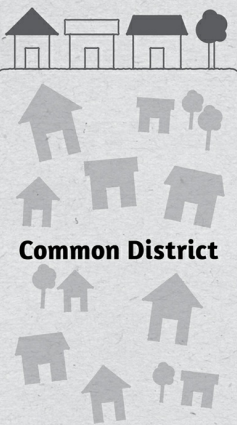
Business District



Fountain of Healing



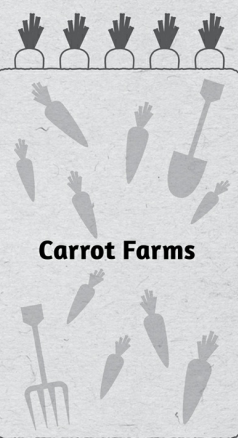
Casino



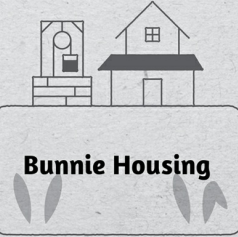
Common District



Public Bath



Carrot Farms



Bunnie Housing

Yuya Kondo

The Demon Lord headed to the casino, ready to summon his next advisor, the professional agoraphobic. He seemed eager to take a look inside the building while he was at it. As the automatic doors slid open, a cool draft came through.

“No electricity required, as always...”

As a high-end facility, the casino was as opulent on the inside as it was on the outside. The entrance opened to an enormous lobby, featuring numerous golden chandeliers dangling from the ceiling and a fountain with an angel statue set in the center of the lobby. Through the lobby stood pillars that resembled Greek temples, each decorated with crystal décor. (This is totally over the top, if I do say so myself...) The ceiling above contained vibrant stained glass windows depicting various scenes, and the floor below was layered with an impressive red carpet; everything about this place gave off the aura that it was the perfect place for important people to play with their money. (The interior is one thing, but food storage is another.) With familiarity, the Demon Lord walked through an employee-only door, taking a direct route to his destination. The Casino hosted a lavish bar called the Golden Tree that had been written to serve food.

The Demon Lord flung the doors to the storage room open with anticipation, but soon looked dejected. (It’s no good... It just came out as an empty pantry.) According to the Casino’s setting, there should have been various foods in the storage room, including delicacies like exotic fruits from around the world. Alas, there wasn’t a single box of food in sight. (Dammit... What about booze?!) He carried on down the hall to the wine cellar and came to a room full of wine racks and shelves, most spaces occupied with bottles that were gloriously *not* empty. The Demon Lord thrust his fists into the air.

“There’s the booze! This is what I’ve been waiting for!” The Demon Lord stepped into the cellar and beamed as he spotted barrels of various sizes that held wine, sake, and shochu. At long last, he could pour himself a drink without

spending any SP. (This is the stuff! You can't have a casino without booze. And... girls in bunny suits?) The Demon Lord cackled, recalling Tahara's comment and imagining the Bunnies working the casino. It would be quite the sight to see the Bunnies roam these golden halls. (Now to the cold room...) With his confidence restored, he headed to another storage room and threw the door open to find rows of industrial refrigerators. "Here they are! Here they are! Hah ha ha!" The Demon Lord couldn't contain his excitement anymore. The refrigerators were packed with beer, chuhais, highballs, and chasers, making for an impressive display. He couldn't help but reach in, grabbing a can of beer labeled Bud Heavy. Just holding the can made him salivate. "What sort of owner would I be if I didn't taste-test before serving it to guests...? Ooh-hoo!" The Demon Lord chugged the whole thing. The crisp yet refreshing sensation was one he had not felt in a while. "Ice cold, too... That's the stuff!" Then he took out a can of Byeneken, cracked it open, and threw the contents down his throat. "Ahh! One taste-test wouldn't cut it, of course. As the owner, I must take full responsibility for quality assurance." He jumped for joy like a mouse with a wheel of cheese before "taste-testing" a few more things he remembered from the good old days, assuring that they were of serving quality. Even as he indulged in this impulsive day-drinking, he saw nothing wrong with his actions under the excuse of quality assurance.

"Demon Lord is drinking again..."

"Woah!" He turned around to find Tron floating in the air, giving him a dirty look. He cleared his throat in an attempt to regain his authority.

"Didn't you see the 'employees only' sign?" he asked.

"I'm *M Ploy E*, too."

The Demon Lord groaned. "Oh, fine..."

"Very fine," Tron deadpanned, and the Demon Lord chuckled in resignation. There was no arguing against Tron and her special eyes. "I want a drink too."

"As if, kid. Besides, this is an important job called QA. Worst case, if anything's mislabeled, the media will have a field day with it, besmirching the casino name that we've carried on for fifteen years."

"I don't understand."

“C-Come on! We’re getting out of here.”

“Ohhhh myyyy...”

The Demon Lord rushed out of the cold room, carrying Tron under his arm. Seeing how she didn’t actually protest, Tron seemed to want to see other locations around the casino. For a child like her, the cold room was simply a boring space with rows of bizarre silver boxes. (I guess I’ll take a look if I’m headed back to the lobby...) The Demon Lord passed through the lobby and onto the actual casino floor, filled with modern equipment in immaculate condition. In addition to casino staples like poker, blackjack, baccarat, and craps, the second floor hosted keno and slot machines, while the third floor held things such as the Game of Life and escape rooms. There were ample opportunities for guests to test both their luck and intellect.

“Fishies...” Tron, still floating along in the air, clung to a giant transparent wall that held a massive aquarium. “Never seen such pretty fishies,” she muttered. “They’re adorable.”

“They’re nice, I suppose...” The Demon Lord didn’t have any personal liking for keeping fish. He simply wanted to provide a little something to break the tension on the cutthroat casino floor. The aquarium tank held varying vegetation as well as water wheels, caves, and mossy rocks that framed the fish happily swimming around. Illuminated by the gentle lighting of the casino floor, the tank itself could have been called a kingdom underwater.

“Amazing. This makes it *complete*,” Tron said, still glued to the wall of the tank.

The Demon Lord couldn’t help but feel like he had brought a child to the aquarium. (I’ve heard that the practice of keeping tropical fish in the house has been around since the 19th century...) He wanted to provide her with some information about tropical fish, but had no knowledge on the matter. Fish were food to him, all things considered. The more he tried to think of something to say, the more his mind was occupied by fillets of sashimi and grilled fish. (Now I’m starting to get hungry... Tuna, salmon, sea bream, yellowtail, amberjack, flounder... I can barely get sashimi around here.) The Demon Lord’s brain was now occupied by thoughts of various fish, all deliciously filleted and served raw.

Tropical fish, on the other hand, were still outside of his pay grade.

“If you want to see something else beautiful, look up,” he pointed.

“Up...?” Tron looked up to see a ceiling that had an ordinary planetarium projected on it. To her, it was a piece of the universe itself, silently twinkling above. “Incredible... It’s like I’m in a dream.”

“You’ll occasionally see shooting stars or the aurora borealis. Some of the players were convinced that seeing a shooting star would increase their odds.” The Demon Lord chuckled at the nostalgic thought.

Tron floated over and wrapped herself around his arm. “I want to live here. Sparkle with Aku!”

The Demon Lord wore a grin. Although the opulence of the place might have been appealing, he was sure that there could not have been a less relaxing space. “This is the casino floor, so you can’t live *here*. I plan on reserving the 13th floor for the guests. Pick any room you want from there.”

“A room for me... I’ll live with Aku.”

The 13th floor consisted of the grand suites, one of them dubbed the Royal Suite, which the Demon Lord expected to somehow be claimed by Luna.

“I just gave Aku a Secret Lair the other day... That might be more to your liking, actually.”

“Secret... Lair?”

The Demon Lord thought that the base might provide a sense of security to Tron, who had been hunted for being a Firebrand. He couldn’t help but recall the beaming smile on Olgan’s face as she was freed from the threat of pursuit.

“Do you want horns...?” The words had slipped through his lips before he realized it. After seeing how much they meant to Olgan, he was curious to see what they meant to Tron.

“I don’t want them. I just want to live the rest of my life in this village with everyone.”

“I see...”

Olgan longed and fought to live, while Tron simply wanted a quiet life. That somehow made sense to the Demon Lord.

“But I do have a wish,” Tron admitted.

“Oh? Why don’t you tell me?” the Demon Lord prompted, lighting a cigarette. He hadn’t heard Tron mention anything like this before.

“I want to marry Zero.”

The Demon Lord began coughing. The situation seemed horrifically similar to when Olgan had asked if he wanted children. “Think about the age difference,” he said with difficulty. “How old are you, anyway?”

“I don’t know. I was too busy to keep count.”

“I know it hasn’t been easy...” Politely, the Demon Lord didn’t prod for more details, as he already knew that she was persecuted by humans and Hellions alike before finally ending up with the Satanists. “Let’s say you’re thirteen. The same age as Aku, so it’s easier to remember.”

Despite the audacity of dictating someone else’s age, Tron looked back at him with her eyes widened, smiling. “Same as Aku? I like it.”

“So it’s settled that you’re under sixteen. None of that *marriage* nonsense,” the Demon Lord declared and then turned to the elevators.

Tron grabbed him by the sleeve, stopping him in his tracks. “Demon Lord,” she called. “You’re not getting away that easy.”

This world had no age restriction, culturally or legally, when it came to marriage. In fact, many nobles were arranged to marry someone on the day of their birth. It was the norm for marriages to be used as a political tool, regardless of how the actual participants felt. Even those born to impoverished families were sent off or sold off to places that needed cheap labor.

“Don’t run away, Demon Lord. Give me an answer.”

“Let go of me! We’re going upstairs!” Grabbing Tron under his arm, the Demon Lord hurried into a cylindrical elevator that matched the casino’s style. Buttons numbered 1 through 13 were lined up on one of the walls, but the Demon Lord placed his index finger on the fingerprint scanner above them. As

soon as he did so, the elevator began to move.

“It’s floating... Going up.”

“You know how they use ropes and wheels to lift heavy things high up? This contraption does it automatically.”

The history of the elevator dated back farther than most realized. According to history, the Roman emperor Nero had three of them installed in his palace. Of course, those were somewhat different from modern iterations in the sense that they were operated by manpower.

“You always make amazing things,” Tron remarked.

“What’s amazing to me is that you can float around in the air all you want...” The Demon Lord admitted. While humans had evolved through technology, the sky still remained unconquered. Regardless of how many machines humans invented to fly, they were still incapable of flight themselves. Any random bird could do it so easily, but not for humans. (Perhaps humans are creatures robbed of their wings by some force...) This fleeting thought seemed surprisingly important, somehow. Just as the Demon Lord began to expand on that idea in his head, the elevator door opened with a ding.

Tron giddily floated out of the elevator and into the penthouse, even more lavish than the casino below. One of the walls was fitted with floor-to-ceiling windows, providing a view of the world below. Only screens of various sizes were outside the windows, with nothing else impeding their view. Tron floated over and pointed upwards.

“Look, Demon Lord! We’re so close to the sky!”

“Close to the sky, huh...? Interesting way of putting it.” The Demon Lord looked up at the striking blue sky, the clouds lazily swimming across it. After watching the aquarium downstairs, even the clouds somehow looked like fish.

“I can see the entire world,” Tron said.

“Nothing but desert as far as the eye can see... The real Las Vegas is in the middle of a desert too, but this is something else...”

Despite the refreshing breeze on the rooftop, the view was thoroughly arid.

However, Tron seemed to see something beautiful before her. “I want to show this to Zero.”

“If he shows up here, he’ll just run around on his bike.” At the same time, running around in that empty expanse with a motorcycle sounded incredible. There were no police, speed limits, or even stop signs. “Just so you know, he’s no hero. In fact, he’s a *bosozoku* from the olden days. He’s on the opposite side of law and order.”

Tron simply tilted her head. She seemed to see that the Demon Lord didn’t believe what he was saying, deep down. “Zero is a depiction of who you want to be, Demon Lord...”

“No...! I just took the simple hero idea that any kid would come up with... Tweaked it for laughs, and sure, I made him badass once in a while but—Wait, what are we even talking about now?!” The Demon Lord irritably smoked his cigarette, turning away.

Tron giggled at his reaction. “Zero is my lover. Demon Lord is my sugar daddy.”

“Don’t ever say that again!” the Demon Lord protested. He looked more like a kidnapper now, standing next to Tron. “Listen to me. I have some work to do... Go play with Aku, won’t you?”

“Okay. See you...*tonight*.”

The Demon Lord groaned. Every time he returned to the village, he usually ended up sleeping between Aku and Tron. He wasn’t even married, and he felt like a dad with two kids. “I’ll tell you how to use the elevator...” he said, but it was literally just pressing a button.

Tron disappeared behind the closing doors, her tiny hand waving at the Demon Lord. He watched the door close and the elevator descend before breathing out a big puff of smoke and throwing the cigarette into his portable ashtray.

“Didn’t expect that... I’d better get started.”

As he prepared to summon a new advisor, the Demon Lord wore a hint of severity in his expression. This time, his mind was set on Yuya Kondo, who

possessed eyes with special abilities. His optically-centric powers involved 360-degree vision, seeing a bird's-eye view, brief premonitions, and even stealing his enemy's eyesight. Because of his powers, no player could dodge Kondo's attacks. Once they'd poked this particular bear, all they could do was brace for the scorching return fire. Naturally, Kondo was largely ignored during most of the countless battles over the Sleepless Castle. He never initiated attacks, and remained in his room as long as no player provoked him. In other words, picking a fight with Kondo would have all cons and no pros.

(Kondo...) The Demon Lord wanted to groan at his current roster of advisors: a genius obsessed with a little sister, a doctor who gets off on dissections, an uncontrollable warhead of a woman, and now a hermit. Even someone with much more managerial confidence than the Demon Lord would have been in torment. (Why did I have to make *all* of the advisors so ridiculous...?) Lament as he did, he couldn't do anything about it. The Demon Lord had no one but himself to blame, as he was merely feeling the repercussions of spitting upwards at the sky. (In any case, he'll be the one to keep the village safe. Come on, Kondo...) After a deep inhale and exhale, he opened the Admin Screen, feeling his heart beat faster. The summoning had begun.

"Kondo, come hither to my presence...!" With this beckoning, two balls of dark and white light each appeared before him. When they merged into one...it morphed into a boy.



“Wait, where am I...? Ahhh! Mister Secretary!”

“Mm. Thanks for coming.”

“Wh-What can I...? D-Did I d-do something t-to make you m-m-mad...?”

(He’s stuttering...) The Demon Lord noticed that Kondo was more *twitchy* than he had designed him, and terribly skittish. Kondo only spoke occasionally to the other young advisor, and rarely held a conversation with anyone but Kato. His social anxiety was no joke. It was safe to say that he felt nothing but fear for the Demon Lord of the Empire, and worse yet, his boss.

“Wh-Wh-Where am I...? Why did you bring me here...?” Kondo’s legs shook like he was a newborn deer, causing his body to quiver like he was experiencing a personal earthquake. The Demon Lord, simply standing before him, seemed like *Yama*, the Hindu and Buddhist lord of the underworld, charged with sentencing the damned.

“Calm down, Kondo. It’s just you and me here.”

“Th-That’s exactly why I’m *panicking*! Ahhhh!”

(How disrespectful can you get...?!) The Demon Lord shook at how terrified Kondo had become at the mere sight of him, but managed to maintain a dignified demeanor. He gently put his hand on Kondo’s shoulder, peering into his face, which was almost too pretty to be masculine.

“I didn’t summon you here to yell at you,” the Demon Lord whispered. “I need your help. That’s why you’re here.”

Kondo muttered something unintelligible, nearly sobbing.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of... Understand?”

“Y-Yes, sir...” Something clicked within Kondo that stopped his shaking. In exchange, his cheeks were now reddening. Whether he was flushing from relief or embarrassment, the boy had finally calmed down enough to hold a conversation.

“I summoned you here, Kondo, because...” The Demon Lord went on to summarize what had happened to him so far. As it was his fourth retelling, the tale seemed more refined. Combined with Kondo’s disposition for the fantasy

genre, he seemed to accept his new reality more smoothly than any of the Demon Lord's previous advisors had. Of course, he made some uncalled-for assumptions along the way.

"Y-You mean you've been summoned across these worlds...?" said Kondo, "As a demonic tyrant, an emperor of Hell, or a genocidal magi-beast..."

"Th-That might not be the way I'd put it..."

"I knew if you'd ever be summoned to another world, Mister Secretary, that you'd be a demon lord! Annihilating a world or two with the snap of your fingers, enslaving the entire female population to create a world-wide harem, defeating a heroine and making her *beg* for mercy..."

"No such plans on the agenda, as of now..." The Demon Lord was starting to feel dizzy at the accusations that Kondo was innocently throwing at him. As a full-blown geek, Kondo almost never engaged in conversations he had no interest in, but became very talkative when it came to conversation topics in his wheelhouse.

"I think you can build a world more sinister than any hardcore game out there, Mister Secretary! You would wage war against gods, stripping goddesses naked and tossing them to orcs and goblins, maniacally cackling as you defile every virgin in the world, and not to mention—"

"Calm down, Kondo."

"Agh!"

The Demon Lord's deep voice struck Kondo, through and through. That was all it took to apparently shatter the bones in his legs, causing the boy to crumble to the ground. He had no problem holding a conversation when it came to the realm of fiction, making him pathetically talkative.

"I-I'm sorry..." he sheepishly said. "One of the light novels I liked went something like that. Most protagonists are run over by trucks before they're reborn. If that were you, Mister Secretary, I think you'd blow the truck to smithereens before tearing the driver to shreds and using his skull as a goblet."

"What kind of person do you think I am...?"

“There’s a rise in the ‘stabbed in an alley’ trend lately, but you’d do more than kill the mugger, first by blowing the entire city off the map. If you were summoned by a goddess, I feel like you’d *bed* her in a matter of seconds. What’s more, you’d stuff the Goddess with your seed guaranteed to insemin—”

“Calm down, Kondo.”

“Agh! I’m sorry! Please don’t be mad at me...!”

The Demon Lord covered his face, as if the repetitive conversation was causing a migraine. Apparently, Kondo was almost more terrified of him than he was of the literal lord of the underworld.

“Listen carefully. This is a different world than the one we were in,” the Demon Lord cautioned. “Naturally, we will act and behave differently.”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

“Different world, different lives. You understand, don’t you?”

“I-I think, I... understand.”

The Demon Lord, satisfied by the answer, outstretched a hand to Kondo, who still sat on the ground. If they kept at it at this rate, it would be nightfall before they would get out of there.

Even after heaving him up to his feet, Kondo stared at the Demon Lord, looking up from his downturned face.

“What’s the matter?”

“N-Nothing... It’s just that, you really seem... *different*... I’m still terrified, but...”

“Hm...” The Demon Lord would feel a little dejected to have an advisor of his own creation remain in fear of him. What’s more, unlike Tahara and Yu, Kondo was only sixteen. “The Empire, our foundation and source of power, does not exist in this world. In a sense, we are a boat drifting without a fleet.”

“A boat...?” Kondo was shocked, to say the least. He had only ever known the members of the Department of Citizen Happiness Management to quietly, but literally, rule the world. Having their leader, the Demon Lord of the Empire, refer to them as something so small was a stark contrast.

Having given the boy a reality check, the Demon Lord lit a cigarette as he gazed out at the horizon. “That’s right. The only force we have to cultivate our future with is our unity. So, I need you to not be afraid. Trust me. Rely on me. In the same manner, I will be relying on you.”

“Y-You’ll be relying on me, Mister Secretary...?”

“Indeed, I will.” The Demon Lord smiled meaningfully.

After a beat, Kondo beamed back at him. At that instant, Kondo shook in a fierce jolt. “Woah...! Something zapped me ag-g-gain!”

“What are you talking about...?”

“R-Really! Something *zapped*—Agh! There it is again!” Kondo’s body was penetrated with glee, being trusted by his omnipotent creator. He leapt into the air at the sensation that could only be described as electrifying. Despite the almost touching sentiment, Kondo was reacting like a love interest in an X-rated video game who was having her vibrator controlled remotely.

“In any case, I’ll show you around the village and introduce you to some people. You’ll work under Tahara moving forward.”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

“I’ve built a Hot Springs Resort in this village. Why don’t you join me for a soak tonight?”

“Wohoah! Another zap!”

“Calm down, Kondo...”

“Eek!”

Another advisor summoned, another bizarre conversation loop. Now that he had four out of his eight advisors from the Empire, the Demon Lord finally had half of his full force reassembled. (I need a huge pile of cash and a lot more activity within the territory to unlock more features... Which means I’ll need a good number of laborers and merchants in addition to more village residents. Then, of course, there’s SP.) He was short on all accounts, leaving him no choice but to carry on like an avaricious juggernaut. Regardless of his intentions, war had already begun.

Yuya Kondo

Race: Human — Age: 16

Weapon Moonstriker

A beautiful bow Kondo always keeps with him. Combined with his skills, it can unleash an unbelievable barrage. Holds infinite arrows.

Armor Street Clothes

As someone who spends most of his time in his room, he doesn't wear any proper armor. His set of skills protects him more than sufficiently. Infinite durability.

Item Realm of Fiction

Kondo carries anime, manga, light novels, and video games from various cultures and time periods. They had absolutely no effect in the game, but in this world...

Level: 1 — HP: 3000/3000 — Stamina: 600/600 — Attack: 40 (+50) — Defense: 25 (+5) — Dexterity: 20 — MP: 0 — Magic Defense: 0

Equipped Skills: First: **Surprise Attack** Second: **Petal Dance** Third: **Squall Strike**
Combat Skills: **Raze, Hammer Smash, Forceful, Vigorous, Deadly Poison, Paralysis, Doom Fire, Avenger, Counter, Self-Preservation, Storm Blow** Survival Skills: **Deactivate Trap, Recover, Hawkeye, Camaraderie, Escapism, Tiger Vision, Inheritance, Suicide Note, Murder-Suicide, Self-Destruct** Special Abilities: **Panorama-Vision, Eye Jack, Defender of Law, ?**

Let the Game Begin

Laborers poured out of carriage after carriage under the pre-dawn sky. They started their commute from the neighboring towns at midnight, getting some sleep on the road. The shortage of housing in the village of Rabbi was one of the most pressing problems.

“Here already...?” one of the laborers yawned.

“Time to make some mon—What the hell is that?!”

“Whatever it is, it’s too early in the morning for you to—Whaaaaat?!”

As they climbed out of their carriages, they each shouted in shock upon seeing the Casino. What’s more, there was even a patch of forest that wasn’t there before.

“What am I looking at?!”

“It—It’s glimmering gold...”

“There wasn’t a forest here before, was there...? What the hell happened?!”

The laborers who were staying in the village laughed. They, too, had stared in disbelief when these things were first constructed.

“Oh, that’s right. You guys weren’t here.”

“What a waste. You missed out on a *miracle*. How many chances do you get in your life to witness one of those...?”

They apparently couldn’t help but gloat after witnessing something that resembled a scene from mythology.

“The Demon Lord’s returned to the village...”

“Demon... Lord? W-Wait a minute! That’s a nickname or something, right?!”

“No, I’ve heard that he slaughtered some crazy monster up north.”

“Was there a fountain there before?!”

“Shut your traps and get over here!” a foreman shouted.

Their day began with a whirlwind of rumors.

The newly summoned Kondo was there, too, giving the adventurers their orders with a sulky look on his face. He was tasked with keeping an eye on the perimeter of the village, and had been given the more competent fighters to work for him.

“Here’s our route for the day. Keep an eye out, especially for anyone trying to leave with water or salt...” Kondo lazily muttered, his eyes on a piece of paper in his hand. This was still a major improvement on his part from his first few days of being completely jumpy and speaking in a barely audible volume. (Ugh, I want to go back to my room, already... The fresh air is killing me...) Ever since his summoning, Kondo had had an eventful time, to say the least. It was painful enough that he had to interact with other people, let alone do several *introductions*, which were downright torturous. Worse of all, Tahara had commanded him to lead the village’s security team. Tahara had meant this as a form of shock therapy for Kondo’s social anxiety, but Kondo wasn’t taking it too well. (Security, my ass... I grasped the entirety of this place in ten seconds. And patrolling the perimeter *on foot*? What, are we in the Stone Age? Tahara needs to learn a thing or two about efficiency...) Continuing to silently curse his current predicament, Kondo turned on his portable cassette player, clearly wanting to get this over with.

In contrast to Kondo’s mood, an upbeat melody and a cheerful voice rang out from the cassette player. “Morning exercise for the Empire, Volume One. Take those hands and stretch to the sky...”

The laborers had initially been awestruck at the music coming from this small box, but they grew accustomed to it quickly, just as they had of the new layout of the village, simply understanding the device to be some sort of magical item. (Ugh... I’d be a *bit* more motivated if this was one of my fave voice actresses...) Kondo stretched his arms, looking like he wholeheartedly couldn’t be bothered. This was the typical morning stretch routine, a fairly popular practice among Japanese workplaces. Tahara had insisted upon implementing this, perhaps in an attempt to curb Kondo’s indulgent lifestyle. The adventurers followed Kondo’s lead. Surprisingly, this morning routine had been well received by

them. For those who could lose their careers with a single injury, a thorough warm-up of their muscles in the morning must have been worth the ten minute investment a day. In fact, even the craftsmen had joined the group. As the exercise came to a close, the members of the Village Defense Force got to work according to their orders.

“So, you’re their leader... How’d a pretty boy like you get the job?” A female warrior approached Kondo, licking her lips and wearing a very revealing outfit. Adventurers had to stand out, above all else, by any means necessary, whether it be in appearance, moniker, demeanor, or theatrics. She was proudly using her figure to her advantage.

However, Kondo’s reaction wasn’t as energized as she had hoped. “I-I’m sorry... I don’t want anything to do with real women.”

“You bet they’re real. You wanna hang out later?”

“I-I’m married body and soul to Ikazucchini-chan from Battleship Collection. What if she thinks I’m cheating on her?”

“Married to zucchini?! You doing Trance in broad daylight?”

“Reality is all a lie... Why won’t they leave me alone...?” Kondo spat out, and the woman left, giving up on having anything to do with him. Kondo pretended to gag before producing his portable video game console.

You’re always working so hard, Yuya! But don’t be afraid to lean on me, okay?

“Th-Thanks... Ikazucchini-chan. But I’m the man, so I have to step up.”

I’m so proud of you! But you have to tell me when you get worn out!

“Of course...! Hee hee hee...”

Watching Kondo engage in buttery sweet conversation with a video game, Tahara couldn’t help but facepalm. His shock therapy might have shot Kondo in the opposite direction.

“Hey, Kondo, why don’t you put the Gaming Boy away and give the ol’ flesh and blood a chance?”

“*Gaming Boy*...? What decade are you living in? Besides, I have a lot of girls who I am married to on a trial basis.”

“I don’t *want* to know what kind of ‘marriages’ you’ve got, but in case you haven’t noticed, we’re in a world where the Empire doesn’t exist. Just give one look at this reality. At real people.”

“Th-Then why don’t you give women who aren’t your sister a chance?”

“The hell did you say?! How am I supposed to look away from the greatest angel of all that is Manami?! Hello?! Anybody home?!”

“Th-The only *real* angel around here is Shigrey from BC...!”

“Huh...?! You wanna say that again?!”

The Demon Lord let out a long sigh, overhearing this on his way home with Aku after relocating the Secret Lair to the Forest of Restoration. The forest seemed less conspicuous than its previous location.

Aku seemed hesitant about how to process the squabble between Tahara and Kondo. “Y-Your employees are...um, very unique, aren’t they, Master Demon Lord...?”

“They have great abilities, believe it or not. As for their character...” The Demon Lord trailed off.

He returned to his office in the Resort, and couldn’t help but wonder what in the world had motivated him to design his characters with such extreme personalities. This sense of regret was long overdue.

(Ugh. I was trying to make them memorable at the time, but now they’re *too* memorable...!) The Demon Lord collapsed into his desk chair, looking and feeling exhausted. Meanwhile, Aku hopped onto the Demon Lord’s knee as if she was home.

“Oh, I have noticed that more people are calling you the Fallen Angel,” Aku cheerfully noted.

The shadow on the Demon Lord’s face, however, did not lift. “Fallen Angel, huh...?” He still couldn’t guess whether that rumor would serve to their benefit or detriment. As someone who was never interested in religion, he had barely any knowledge of Western mythology. At the end of the day, he knew nothing about this Lucifer. (Goes to show the reverence the people of this country hold

for angels, I suppose. Even a fallen one.) The backbone of Holylight was its worship of angels. At times, that faith was regarded higher than secular laws or social contracts. He had expected people to fear and detest the Fallen Angel, but the people had been receiving him with surprising warmth. (I'd even say they're expecting something from me...) Perhaps their reactions were rooted in the fact that their exaltation and devotion had never earned them a single coin in their pocket nor made their lives any better. The exclusively aristocratic rule had begun to generate support and anticipation for even someone like the Demon Lord.

"A good designer gives the player everything they ask for. A great designer gives them what they want before they think of asking."

Another quote from Director Aoki sprung to his mind. As annoying as they were, they had all been tested by experience. The Demon Lord had fought on the front lines as a game designer for years, so he was far from oblivious to popular demand and the voice of the collective.

"I believe the Still Angel has summoned you to make this country better, Master Demon Lord."

"...Didn't peg that thing for a good Samaritan."

On the other hand, the Still Angel had longed for chaos to rule and annihilate this world. If he had successfully summoned the *real* Hakuto Kunai, his wish would have been granted. (If anything's a false god, it's that Still Angel...) The Demon Lord decided that it was only fair for him to carry some cynicism with him when the one who summoned him was full of it. (At this point, I'll use everything I've got...) His best course of action was to use whatever he could to recover his features as quickly as possible.

"We have a good source of cash and labor now... Next is the dungeon."

"You're going north again...?"

"I think so. There's no such thing as too much SP, and I'll be needing more powerful magical items."

"Then, take me with you—"

"No." The Demon Lord shot her down. As lenient as he was with Aku about

most things, he had no intention of taking her sightseeing to a dangerous dungeon. “You’ll be safe here. With Tahara, Yu, and now Kondo, no monster or devil could come near you if they tried.”

“I’ll still miss you...”

“Erm...” The Demon Lord couldn’t help but wonder what he meant to her, and what she meant to him. (We’re as different in age as a father and daughter, but I’m not her father. Still...) For some reason, he saw Aku as someone he had to protect. Something inside of him toiled with a terribly powerful urge, almost like destiny, to protect her. This sense of purpose had grown more powerful by the day. “I understand...” The Demon Lord quietly said. “I can’t take you anywhere dangerous... Precisely because of how much you mean to me,” he carefully explained. He expected Aku to understand once he gave his reason.

Aku lifted her chin. “How much...I mean to you?” Her meaningful gaze gave the Demon Lord a bad feeling about this, much too late to the draw. “Am I someone important to you, Master Demon Lord?”

“Y-You are...”

“You are to me, too, Master Demon Lord. You are the most important person in my life!”

“I-I see... Ha ha ha...” The Demon Lord couldn’t help but look around, wondering what catastrophic misunderstanding someone might have if they were to walk in now. He felt like that interaction alone could have landed him in the slammer if they were in modern-day Japan. “W-Well, that’s what I mean... I can’t take you to a dungeon, but I’ll build more places for you to play around the village.”

“I’ll be okay...without anything else.” Aku wrapped herself around the Demon Lord.

Holding Aku in her white dress felt like holding a small white kitten in his lap. The Demon Lord stroked her head, gently explaining, “The next time I return...I expect to have another advisor.”

“What kind of person are you calling next?”

“Hm...” The Demon Lord thought of a girl, who was by all means the most

talented among the advisors. She had an icy look and tone, but had a kind heart and a loving twinkle in her eye. “Let’s see... She’s kind, like you.”

“Like me?!”

(And most likely... Magic won’t have any effect on her.) If her settings were going to work just as they had in the game, the Demon Lord expected her to become the perfect bodyguard. Just then, a Communication came in from Tahara.

We have a long-awaited visitor, Chief. The lord of the neighboring village to our east wants to see you.

Oh? Wonder what he could want?

Gah ha ha! He can’t just ignore us when you can see the building from a mile away, can he?

I see. Then let us give him a warm welcome.

The Demon Lord ended the Communication with a line that suggested more meaning behind his words than he had actually intended. In reality, he simply wondered if the village elder was there to complain about the sudden construction of a casino. (A lot of casinos and stuff get opposed by communities for things like worsening the crime rate...)

“Is something wrong, Master Demon Lord?”

“Looks like I’m dealing with an irate complaint.”

“You’re going to work, then? Then I’ll go help harvest carrots!”

“Take it easy out there, Aku.”

Subwa Aye, the lord of the village that neighbors Rabbi to the east, sat atop a camel with a disgruntled expression on his face. He had been so rudely interrupted by the foolish clamoring of his people, so he had finally agreed to visit Rabbi just to shut them up. (Peasants. Don’t they have anything better to do than to waste my time? No matter, another excuse to raise taxes.)

Subwa made up his mind, reviewing a list of fine art pieces that had been nearly worn to shreds. Nobles prioritized the acquisition of famous art pieces above all. Growing one’s art collection garnered fame, popularity, wealth, and

ultimately, prosperity. No matter how poor their land, a single masterpiece boosted a noble's clout. (I won't go as far as to wish for a Lord Crimson. All I need is *one* decent piece...) Subwa scowled at the list, but was taken out of his thoughts. As the dust storm settled, a giant temple-like construction came into view. (A mirage...? No, there's something lit up!) Subwa rushed his camel forward towards an unbelievable sight. While he had been delivered news about the neighboring village, he had been too consumed with art to even leave his manor. He had, with much reluctance, finally bothered to make the trip at his people's insistence, and now he was faced with an otherworldly sight he would have never expected. He had only known the village of Rabbi as a dilapidated little settlement. In fact, it was common knowledge among nobles that a Holy Maiden was the lady of the land, but only in name.

"What is this...?! What's happening?! Am I dreaming...?"

An unending horde of people went to-and-fro throughout the village. They were all busily working, a stark contrast from the rest of the nation. The roads were generously paved with expensive stone sheets, topped with more shops and stands than Subwa could count. What's more, there were several buildings still under construction. The most mystifying feature, however, was the enormous fountain in the center of the village. The prospect of a spring erupting in the middle of the arid wasteland was an unthinkable one, but the fountain stood nonetheless, with a long line of people waiting to have their canteens filled by an attendant.

"How did that forest sprout here?! And what's that giant temple behind it?!" Subwa shrieked, unable to bear any more of it. He seemed desperate to try and wake up when Tahara wandered over, as if to hammer in the reality of the situation.

Tahara had a physique without a shred of excess and a bizarrely foreign appearance. To top it off, he was exuding an aura that showed he brazenly acknowledged his own strength. "Took you long enough," he started. "I'll give ya the tour since you're here, but my boss has got a short fuse. Does *not* go easy on useless dunces...or boneheads that don't know when to get off their asses."

"Wha...?!" Subwa nearly fell from his camel in anger.

He would have been hard-pressed to find any other man who would greet a noble with such insults. “Oh yeah. My name’s Tahara. I’m in charge of the construction projects around here. Not that we’ll see each other for long, but no need to skip introductions, huh?”

Subwa chewed his lip, baffled by the unbelievable rudeness displayed against him. (Filthy...peasant! Who do you think I am?!) He raged, but somehow failed to find the words to set the man straight. In fact, he felt an increasingly visceral pressure constrict his lungs.

“I mean, I’ll get you in the door, but... Don’t get your hopes up, ’kay?”

Infuriated as he was, Subwa wisely decided to dismount his camel. Tahara had been so thoroughly talking down to him that he instinctively acted to protect his social status.

“Smart move. That earned you a brownie point or two.”

“M-My name is Subwa Aye... I-I humbly request an audience with the lord of the village...” Now he was completely dancing in Tahara’s palm. Subwa felt an eerie dichotomy of blinding humiliation and an almost irresistible urge to grovel before Tahara.

Villains, more often than not, exuded a strange sense of reliability to their allies. As if by second nature, Tahara had carried himself in that way, drawing an irreversible contrast between him and Subwa.

Meanwhile, Subwa was frantically recalling all of the rumors about the village that had been brought to him. (So this was what the peasants were going on about...!) Subwa was sure of that much after seeing more hustle and bustle than he had ever seen in his life. Moreover, he feared Tahara, who seemed to be the orchestrator of this operation, let alone whoever his boss was. Judging by Tahara’s appearance, they were undoubtedly foreigners. (As I recall, the man has the nerve to call himself the Demon Lord...) Subwa had scoffed at the rumor before, just like he did at the rumor about the resurrection of the King of Devils. Being a creature of myth, the rumor had faded away after a short time, so he considered the rumor of the Demon Lord nothing more than a joke.

But now... (What is this peculiar structure...? It’s unconventional yet spectacular...!) Any skepticism was swept from Subwa’s mind the instant he laid

eyes on the Hot Springs Resort. He stepped through the front door after Tahara, but could barely walk straight. (H-Have I wandered into *another world*...?!) Subwa heard Tahara say something, but couldn't retain the words, on the account of being surrounded by priceless treasures. "L-Lord Tahara, what is this place...?! There are masterpieces hung everywhere, and that vase, for example...!" Everything from the sliding doors and vases to the paintings hung on the wall were each a magnificent piece of art in their own right. The faint tune of a *koto* was drifting into his ears from somewhere, further accentuating the atmosphere, and therefore the beauty of those art pieces.

Tahara turned around, straight-faced. "Keep yapping, and the Secretary's gonna crack your skull wide open with a marble ashtray. I've seen too many morons go out like that."

The warning hit Subwa like a bucket of ice water. (Th-This can't be happening...! What savage monster am I about to face?!) It was plain to see that Tahara had spoken in earnest. Terror shook Subwa from the pit of his stomach.

Eventually, Tahara came to a halt before a heavy door. "Here he is, Chief," he said.

(P-Please... Let him be a reasonable man... Save me, glorious Angel...!) Subwa prayed, as if he were kneeling at the gallows. When he entered the room, he could see the back of the head of a man sitting in a chair across the room, his pitch-black hair instilling dread in Subwa. When the chair swiveled and revealed him... Subwa nearly screamed, (No, it can't be! He's the Demon Lord, no doubt about! Who else could he possibly be?! Why have you forsaken me, Angel...?!) The man's glare, coupled with his crushingly intimidating presence, made Subwa buckle at the knee, overcome with the powerful regret that he had not pledged servitude to this man sooner. Now, he was painfully aware of what Tahara meant when he said "Took you long enough."

"It's a pleasure to meet you... Oh? Are you feeling well?"

"Y-Yes...!"

"I must thank you for making the long journey on such a scorching day," the Demon Lord said.

The politeness and the cool smile maintained by the Demon Lord caused Subwa to break into a flood of sweat all over his body. Subwa was now assured that the Demon Lord was playing a game to torment him.

“Simba Way, was it? You must have pride in your name.”

“I-It’s Subwa...” Subwa’s meek suggestion never reached the ears of the Demon Lord.

Meanwhile, Tahara stood to the side, shoulders shaking and mouth agape. While he kept silent, Tahara seemed desperate to contain his laughter. The Demon Lord stood and approached the couch in the center of the room. Subwa nearly screamed, silently begging for the man to remain at the other end of the room. His desperate prayer to the Angel was left unanswered, however, as the Demon Lord sat on the couch and gave Subwa a look that seemed to pierce into his soul. Much to Subwa’s horror, the Demon Lord held a large marble ashtray in his hand. (Nooooo! H-How could this be?! He’s going to kill me!) A sign of courtesy from the Demon Lord had come across as horrifying as a death sentence.

Seeing how all the color had drained from Subwa’s face, Tahara interjected, “Can’t have a conversation if he’s too busy shaking in his pants, eh, Chief? Let’s take it easy.”

“Hm...” The Demon Lord produced a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Of course, he had no intention of scaring Subwa, but his presence was overwhelming, given how he sat there like the godfather who ruled the entire world with a massive crime syndicate. Subwa, on the other hand, was quivering like a newborn goat.

“You’d better take a seat, too,” Tahara said. “The Secretary’s a busy man.”

“Y-Yes!” Subwa took his seat on the couch, almost collapsing from fear. He already felt like he was on death row before the conversation had even begun.

While the Demon Lord thought this was some sort of complicated complaint, Tahara had another plot in mind entirely. “Hate to start ya off with bad news... But looks like your lordship ain’t for long. You noticed a thing or two about this village, didn’t ya?” This was a ferocious remark from the high ground, making it sound as if Subwa’s fate had already been decided upon.

“W-Well...” Subwa stammered.

“I don’t think I need to go over some *differences* between your village and ours. They say the grass is greener on the other side. Well, what do you think your people see when they look over at our side?”

Subwa could only grunt in response. In fact, he had already faced resistance from his people precisely because of how much greener the grass of Rabbi had grown.

“I wish I could tell you a little pushback from your subjects would be the end of it... But it does look like you’ve always pushed them back down by force. You wanna know something? Sooner or later, that built up resentment is going to blow. In this case, my money’s on them ditching their farms to find refuge somewhere else.”

Typically, nobles avoided causing strife between each other by extraditing any refugees that might turn up from neighboring territories. (But if they were to seek refuge here...) Subwa wandered, and a chill crawled down his spine.

Tahara grinned, as if he knew all along that Subwa would reach this conclusion. In a nonchalant tone, Tahara piled on, “Just to be clear... We’re not *trying* to make your folks skip town on ya. We just can’t bring ourselves to not help those in need. Our lady, the Holy Maiden, is just full of compassion.”

(As if... You knave!) Subwa was assured that Tahara and the Demon Lord were waiting precisely for his people to come running to them. If he were to protest or request extradition, he would be giving them the perfect kindling to burn his whole place down. (I didn’t expect them to go for such a slow kill.) Subwa didn’t know if they were going to blame his people seeking refuge on the heavy taxes or his general negligence, stemming from devoting his time and attention to his art collection. In any case, the defection of his people was sure to become a tale of embarrassment that echoed all the way to Central. Any of these possibilities was a fatal blow to someone like Subwa who ruled a small village way out in the country. (Think of something, think... Anything to get out of this!)

Despite his desperation, not a single solution came to Subwa’s mind. After witnessing prosperity of inconceivable proportions and facing down these powers backed by the Holy Maiden, Subwa saw no way to come out of this a

winner. Nobles, by nature, gravitated towards and preferred to support the powerful. No respectable noble would give a fallen-from-grace country noble a second glance. In fact, they would only be incentivized to kick him while he was down.

Seeing that Subwa was living out his own personal apocalypse, Tahara plopped himself down next to the lord, and—as if he had just walked into the room—patted him on the shoulder. “And that’s my spiel...” he said with a friendly grin, the intimidating aura completely gone from him.

“Huh?” Subwa felt the crushing weight slip off of his shoulders.

“My B, my B! Just wanted you to have a nice, clear picture of our situation here. The tough-guy act’s over, now... Let’s talk about what lines our pockets, eh?”

“M-Money, you mean...?”

“From what we’ve gathered, you collect about five gold medallions a year in taxes. You’ve never changed that rate no matter how bad the harvest was, either. Remember when you let twelve of your folks starve to death?”

“Y-Yes, I think so...” Sweat began to trickle down Subwa’s face. He couldn’t even imagine how Tahara had uncovered the statistic when Subwa had meticulously covered it up. (At this rate, he may even know of the *other* incident last year...!)

Hardly any noble was spotless, so Subwa gradually sank into doubt the more Tahara talked. With the exception of Yahooo, the land east to the Holy City was a barren and undesirable expanse, mostly occupied by nobles like Subwa, whose lands were barely sustainable. Indeed, they were nobles in name only. The fact that Subwa was receiving the equivalent of a very high salary in the modern world was a testament to how heavily he was taxing his people.

“So, I got a proposal for ya... Wanna *offer* your land to the Holy Maiden?”

“Offer... You wish to strip me of everything to my name?!”

“Don’t sweat it. I’ll get you a pension of five gold medallions a year in exchange. You won’t be bothered with governing anymore. You can focus on your art collection.”

“Pension...” In this world, pensions were a form of honor payment, given to families of Holy Knights who had died in combat, or to soldiers who were honorably discharged and forced into retirement. Naturally, Subwa had no medals nor achievements to speak of that would have earned him a pension. However, that wouldn’t be true for long if he offered up his entire land to a Holy Maiden.

“Just to be clear, this ain’t a one-generational deal, either. The pension will carry on with your bloodline. You’ll get an official document signed by Holy Maiden Luna.”

“By Lady Luna...” Subwa slightly narrowed his brow, visibly less trusting of Luna’s signature than White’s.

Tahara, having expected this reaction, swiftly pulled the ace from his sleeve. “If that’s not enough, you’ll have the Madam’s signature right below hers.”

“The Madam’s?!” She was nothing short of a deity to a country noble like Subwa. Someone whom he could only dream of catching a glimpse of from a distance.

“The pieces over there were gifted to us by the Madam, actually. Pretty clear to see what kind of relationship we have with her, don’t you think?”

“Could it be...? A Count Cross painting?! An Ema vase?!” Subwa shrieked upon inspecting the carelessly set up art pieces. He had been too nervous to even notice them before this point.

As the Demon Lord listened to their conversation, he quietly exhaled a puff of smoke. He couldn’t help but feel like Tahara was employing some *yakuza* negotiation tactics: flashing a gun under the jacket and scaring the wits out of the target before finally handing them a carrot. Their objective of garnering a positive reputation had given way to full-blown intimidation. (I thought I was just going to field a nasty complaint... But this is an opportunity we can’t let slip through our fingers!)

As if he was reading the Demon Lord’s mind, Tahara piled on, first with a caring look... “Sure, I won’t stop ya if you decide to put up a fight, but if you do...” His eyes shone bright with violence. “We won’t hold back.” His gaze swallowed Subwa, robbing the man of his senses. “Even a little kid would know

the better deal: A, you're strolling down easy street. B, you're tossed to the desert without—"

"A-A-A-A-A-A sounds like the better option, indeed! Yes, sir!" Subwa sprang. He felt like, if he had let Tahara finish his sentence, he would be forced into choosing option B.

In truth, that was exactly Tahara's intention. "Oh yeah...? Then let's wrap this up." Tahara grinned and patted Subwa on the shoulder again. Their conversation wrapped up cleanly, concluding the real estate extortion under the guise of a generous offering to the Holy Maiden.

The Demon Lord sighed out a white cloud of relief. (I don't need to lift a finger with these guys around... This ruling thing is a piece of cake.) The Demon Lord produced a piece of junk from his Item Folder after watching the whole exchange. He had initially intended to present this as a form of compensation if Subwa had been irate. "I can't let you leave empty-handed after coming all this way."

"Th-This is...!" Subwa gasped at the item the Demon Lord had nonchalantly handed off to him. This was what Akane had acquired in Belphegor's castle. For all the Demon Lord knew, this bizarre wooden sculpture was nothing more than a piece of junk. "Could it be real...? No, it can't be! It *must* be a replica... No, I can't deny it, it's real!"

"You have a good eye..." the Demon Lord said knowingly, concealing his shock at Subwa's freak-out. The item depicted a little red bird, sculpted by Lord Crimson, who had crafted numerous masterpieces while serving as minister of his country. Owing to the fact that most of the Lord Crimson pieces in this world were stored in Belphegor's treasury, the price of any one of his creations rose to an astronomical level. Collectors called them Mirage Relics. Subwa had dreamed many nights about owning one of these.

He straightened his back and dramatically bowed down on the ground, holding up the sculpture. His cheeks were wet with genuine tears as he was rendered almost speechless. "Wh-What an h-h-honor—"

"I was moved by your *faith*..." The Demon Lord answered with a smile. "I'm sure White, as well as Luna, will appreciate your pure show of devotion."

Subwa felt relief wash over him, convincing himself that this had nothing to do with money or violence, but was a bona fide offering of burning devotion. There was no truth to this, of course, but most people would struggle to turn down such a good excuse. Subwa decided to fully embrace it.

“You can stick a fork in that,” Tahara said as he threw himself down on the couch after seeing Subwa off, a satisfied grin on his face. “Came in clutch with the souvenir, Chief. He’s way into that thing, huh? Kinda weird that he wouldn’t stop crying over it.”

“I just happened to come across it, so I’m glad he liked it.”

“Yeah, as if. Knowing you, you went and found the thing for exactly this purpose.”

(I thought it was a piece of junk!) The Demon Lord silently protested.

Tahara produced a map as he scratched his head. He marked off the new addition to their territory and began to contemplate. “What are your thoughts on the *add-on*, Boss?”

“The village to our east... Reserve a portion of it for a temporary shelter, and use the rest to expand our fields.”

“Thought so...” Tahara commented.

The Demon Lord had meant it as compensation for the trouble he had caused the Bunnies when he first began modifying the village. Expanding to the east also allowed them to expand their farms.

“I’ve been racking my brain about how to take in the Bunnies we got back from *abroad*,” Tahara said. “They left on their own accord, once. Thought it might leave a bad taste for both sides to have them waltz back now that the village is booming.”

“Hm...”

“But it’d be a different story if we’re hurting for field hands to tend to our newly expanded farmland. I bet it’d be easier for them to come back if we’re asking for a favor, y’know?”

“That’s a splendid idea.”

“Ah, gimme a break. I can barely keep up just tracing the tracks you’ve laid out.”

(That’s my line!) As badly as the Demon Lord wanted to disagree with him, he couldn’t help but be impressed by Tahara. People as cunning as him often felt emotionless or condescending, but Tahara never ignored human emotions, which gave an impression of kindness. (How cool is this...?) The Demon Lord simply thought. Characters he had designed ages ago were now advising him in real life. He couldn’t imagine a more satisfying manifestation of his creations than this.

“I’ll get a grand homecoming rolling, then. We’ll need Bunnies by the hundreds if we want that casino up and running.”

“What of the villagers we’ve acquired?”

“I’ll toss ’em a generous amount of coin to have ’em build the temporary shelter. Give ’em a taste of the golden Shangri-La we’ve got in store.” Tahara wanted to create a natural cause and effect of joining the Demon Lord’s ranks and enjoying their prosperity. In fact, he specialized in manipulating the flow of the public in this way.

“More rapid constructions to the east...”

“Well, now that we’ve got our first, all the offerings will start to snowball.” Tahara drew a large red circle on the map to the east of the village... The area encompassed about a third of Holylight’s landmass. Their plan of taking over the country was steadily becoming a reality.

“The problem’s over here... Apparently, he’s not backing down. Heard he’s scrambling to get his troops in order,” Tahara chuckled, pointing to the western side of Holylight. Western Holylight belonged to Dona’s noble faction, containing abundant mines that produced Water Spell Stones. “It all started with that trap with the music box, then that little rat they sent, the Military and the Central nobles making up... Now they’re finally baring their fangs at us directly.”

“Dona Dona, was it? Sounds like he should head off to market.”

“Bah ha ha! You’re killing me with those jokes, Chief!” Laughing heartily,

Tahara circled the majority of Western Holylight, too.

The Demon Lord didn't need to ask what he meant. (It's going to start...) As serious as the matter was, the Demon Lord had no reason to object to this plan. The more he discovered about Holylight, the more he was sure that letting Tahara run the country would leave most people much better off. Besides, expanding their territory seemed like a must if he wanted to defeat his impending enemies.

—*GAME OVER*—

The eerie line of text flashed in the Demon Lord's mind again. Every time it did, he could feel something deep within him boil. He couldn't tell if the emotion he felt was anger, rebellion, or simple defiance, but he knew for certain that he wanted to clock straight in the face whoever had sent him that message.

(Now... Let this *Game* of yours commence.)

The Village of Gold

The Demon Lord decided to inspect the village with Tahara in tow, both of them concealed in Stealth Stance, since their very presence alone would cause a commotion.

Hey, that girl's hustlin' today.

Mm.

Tahara was looking at the Field Hospital, swarmed with hopeful patients. Among them, Cake was handing out water and speaking to the elderly in an obviously self-sacrificing demeanor.

"Hello, sir," she called to one elder. "It's quite hot today, would you like to take a seat in the tent over there?"

"My, my... How caring you are, little Cake."

"Let go of her hand, you old bag!" Another elderly man shouted.

"Mama Cake... Mama... Wahhhhhh!"

"Mooooommmmmmyyyy!"

"Shut the hell up, you brain-rotted old farts! Cake is my *granddaughter*!"

The elderly, having been completely fooled by Cake's lovely smile and demeanor, had erupted in their usual bout of chaos. Many of them constantly requested to adopt or—for some reason—be adopted by Cake. She had established herself as an angelic figure around the hospital.

The Demon Lord struggled to find the humor in the fact the people venerated Yu like a goddess and adored Cake like a perfectly innocent angel.

It ain't funny that the fatales are concentrated in the hospital, Tahara communicated. Try playing a horror game set in that place. Not even plot armor would get you out of there alive.

This had nearly drawn a chortle from the Demon Lord. He could easily

imagine Cake as the jump scare NPC and Yu as the terrifying mad doctor that never stopped pursuing the player.

She... Should get along with Yu just fine, the Demon Lord replied.

I second that... I can deal much better when they've got something to hide.

Tahara's ideal position was in mutually beneficial relationships like the ones he had with the Madam and Cake. He could manage finding win-win solutions. On the other hand, he didn't know how to handle people like Aku or Weeb who were genuinely selfless, finding it extremely difficult to figure out what he could offer them in exchange for what they wanted of him.

When it comes to that princess, Boss... Ah, never mind. I don't even have to ask.

(Oh *now* you don't tell me what I should do?!) The Demon Lord was still unsure of how to handle Cake and the delicate situation she had told him about. He was yet to have a concrete grasp on all this talk about Xenobia and her fallen nation.

What's the best course of action, in your opinion? the Demon Lord prompted.

To his dismay, Tahara's response was more humble than he had hoped. *No need to entertain me, Chief. You got so many answers stuffed up there, you don't have room for my half-baked one.*

(It's stuffed, alright. Stuffed full of hot air!) Despite the Demon Lord's turmoil, Tahara had no intention of voicing his opinion to his boss who had always read a thousand steps ahead and constructed the exact situations when and how he needed them.

Tahara had taken the question to be a test of his intelligence, and felt like he was being put on the spot. (Gimme a break, for real...) Tahara thought. (*My first move wasn't along a perfectly charted course to world domination. Man, if I could get a peek of what's going on inside his head...*)

(And now you're not saying anything?!) The Demon Lord silently fumed, (It would be so much easier if you'd just tell me the answer!)

They carried on, in silence, their thoughts unbeknownst to each other. The next phenomenon they came across was the Mole gang digging a well,

apparently supervised by Luna.

“Can’t you dig any faster?!” she shrieked. “We’re going to be here all day!”

“You don’t know a thing about wells, so stay out of it! You can’t just dig straight down like a moron!”

“Huh? You just need a hole in the ground, don’t you? I’ll whip up a spell, and —”

“D-Don’t you dare, you idiot! You’ll take out the frame!”

As Luna and the Mole leader bickered, Eagle watched from a short distance away. She looked almost spectral, or as if an invisible barrier separated her from the rest of the world.

The girl’s always like that, ain’t she?

Always? the Demon Lord repeated.

She stays out of the conversation. Puttin’ herself at a distance.

A mix of emotion befell the Demon Lord. Eagle’s curse had been lifted, but her scars were far from healed. (She said that she was the cause of many conflicts and many deaths...) There didn’t seem to be an easy solution for her situation. That being said, the Demon Lord wasn’t particularly worried about Eagle. (She’s always got a friend by her side, after all...) Watching Luna chirp on as usual, the Demon Lord quietly left the scene.

He and Tahara continued their lap around the village, and finally revealed themselves behind the Field Hospital.

“Hm? What kinda business do we have back here?” asked Tahara.

“I made a promise to Aku. We’ll set up a pool back here with Area Modification.”

“A pool, huh...?” Tahara’s nostalgia for the idea of a pool was drowned out by his astonishment that the Demon Lord would go so far as to perform Area Modification for that girl. He had heard of this promise from Aku in passing, but had been wondering if his boss was really going through with it. There were plenty of facilities that the village of Rabbi could use at the moment. Was a pool really one of them?

“Let’s begin... Area Modification!” The Demon Lord selected the Pool from the admin screen, and a pool materialized in the ground with a bright flash of light. This would have been an extraordinary sight if these two had not witnessed it so many times. Back in the game, areas were regularly—often weekly—changed up to maintain the players’ interest.

“Let’s keep this place open just to our little family, for now.”

“You got it, Boss...!” Tahara was considerably shaken at the Demon Lord’s choice of vocabulary. While he had always had eight advisors, who were the individuals closest to him, he had never called them anything other than just that: advisors. (Family, huh...?)

Considering his words, the Demon Lord casually added, “Of course, you’ll have free access to it. I’d actually prefer you check on it once in a while. Luna might even drown herself from having too much fun.”

Tahara let out a chuckle. “I’d believe it, Chief.”

“Now, I have an appointment with the Madam. Excuse me.” The Demon Lord Quick Traveled away.

Tahara was left feeling a dull pulse buzzing through his body. (You’re saying... I’m part of your family, too...?) All sorts of plans and schemes that Tahara had been hatching in his mind had vanished without a trace, for the time being. He stood there, as if to keep his feet on the ground in defiance of some unseen current. After some time, Tahara shook his head and walked away.

—Inside the Casino.

The structure was currently dubbed “the Golden Temple.” Its walls shone gold as neon lights refracted off of them, making the temple a holographic beacon shimmering day in and day out. Once this facility opened its doors, it was sure to rake in nearly literal mountains of money.

On the 13th floor, Kondo was uncharacteristically hard at work. Monitors filled the room, each of them displaying a different video feed from the security cameras he had set up throughout the village for the sole purpose of minimizing his need to go outside. The rest of the room was taken up by gaming consoles, bookshelves full of comic books and light novels, and display cases full of figure

after figure. This was the room of a professional freelance isolationist.

“Better put a poster of Santory-chan in the room, too!”

...*Spasiba*, a girl called, having appeared on a translucent screen that materialized around Kondo. Despite the sci-fi aesthetic of the monitor, it was just displaying a character from a dating sim.

“And a Shigrey-chan figure on my desk...!”

Another screen suddenly emerged, displaying a beautiful girl staring at Kondo.

Commander Kondo, is that me...?

“W-Well...! Yes, it is...but I keep for strictly academic purposes!”

Kondo’s bliss however, was interrupted by a knock at the door. Kyon called from the hall, having brought him a late breakfast. “Mister Kondo? Breakfast time, hoppity.”

“N-No thanks...” Kondo stammered. “I’m going off on an expedition, and I need to progress the Holey Grail War.”

Kyon scoffed in indignation. “Then I’ll leave it right here outside your door... Hoppity.” She then left down the hall, her bunny ears bouncing along. While she was now acting as the mother of a troubled youth, she was the same age as Kondo. There was an astonishing contrast in character between a sixteen-year-old who did all sorts of jobs, from tending the fields to serving customers, and a sixteen-year-old who never left his room.

Momo, having watched the interaction from down the hall, kept staring at the closed door. “That guy’s *still* not coming out?”

“No... It’s like he never wants to leave his room.”

“Mister Shadow never brings in anyone normal.”

“I-I’m sure Kondo has some special powers, too...” Kyon muttered in defense of the Demon Lord.

Momo, however, was concerned with another thought. She had now witnessed quite a few of the Demon Lord’s unexplainable mystical constructions, but this glittering Golden Temple was the coup de grace;

something so far beyond her understanding. “Maybe Mister Shadow really is the Fallen Angel.”

“Maybe...”

“Who else could have built these things?”

The mythical rebel, as Kyon and Momo imagined, must have been some higher being whose powers surpassed even that of the three angels worshiped in Holylight. However, even if the Demon Lord was technically the embodiment of evil, the two Bunnies saw him as a deity of fortune and prosperity. No one could argue with or explain the explosive evolution of Rabbi.

“And Mister Shadow said to expand the farms,” Momo said, adding to the stream of good news.

“No way!”

“Mister Shadow has an intimidating face, but never lies. Everything he says becomes reality.” Momo had muttered the exact same sentiment as the Madam. Morality aside, everything that came out of his mouth was beyond superhuman. Almost divine.

“Mister Shadow must be in disguise... I bet he transforms and stuff.”

“What?! Transforms how? Into what?! Does he have a real carrot?”

“No doubt.”

“Is it nutritious? How big is it?”

The Bunnies continued their enthusiastic conversation on their way out of the casino. The Madam passed them on her way into the ground-floor lobby, and while this was not her first visit to the Casino, she was overwhelmed nonetheless. Not even she had ever stepped into a building that came close to the glitz and glamor of this temple. She imagined that, if any construction came close to it, it must have existed back in the days of myth.

“The power of those above the clouds...” The Madam pictured clearly how she imagined the Fallen Angel Lucifer to be. This was only natural, after the Demon Lord had materialized such opulence from nothing. “*Elevator*, he called it... I wonder how this Magical Item operates.” The Madam had always

struggled to climb steps due to her large stature. Now, all she had to do was step into the mysterious box and it would carry her stories upward at an astonishing speed. (Maybe these things were commonplace in ancient times...) As a woman with a taste for glamor, the Casino had ticked all of her boxes. She had astutely discerned the theme of the place ("A fleeting dream") and had found beauty in its impermanence.

Penthouse authorization granted. Going up to the fourteenth floor.

With a mechanical hum, the box began gradually rising. The Madam's imagination swelled, picturing the penthouse she had yet to visit. (The top floor of the temple... I wonder how the view is.) When the box came to a halt, its door opened with infuriating slowness, revealing a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, presenting an awe-inspiring view of the village.

"It's been too long, Madam." The Demon Lord turned from where he was standing by the wall of windows, stunning her. He was so perfectly matched for the grandness that the penthouse embodied. Of course, the Demon Lord had always seemed to carry gravitas and elegance with him, as long as he kept his mouth shut. Now, combined with the overwhelming sophistication of the room, he exuded an indescribable allure. "You're even more beautiful than when I saw you last..."

Electrifying glee shot from the Madam's head to her toes. She felt herself become warmer. Despite her best efforts, her breathing hastened. "Your praise brings me joy second to none, Mister Demon Lord."

The Demon Lord wore a chivalrous smile. "Many a nemesis stands in the way of Beauty... But they have evidently run for the hills in the face of your hard work and self-improvement." He gracefully led the Madam to the luxurious sofa. Beneath the façade of his confident and refined gesture, the Demon Lord was sweating bullets. (Who *are* you?! There's not even a resemblance!) The Madam had lost much weight, and even her bones seemed to be thinning. Unbeknownst to the Demon Lord, the curse of an Ancient Devil that had plagued the Madam's family for generations had been reduced to the brink of breaking. It was an enormously vengeful hex, but ultimately stood no chance before Akira Ono's world. The Demon Lord comment was simply a statement of fact rather than flattery.

“I’ve heard of your achievements in the North...”

“I simply disposed of a cumbersome heap of metal.” The Demon Lord politely smiled as if to mask his shock about her appearance, but the Madam was almost as shocked as he was. A Mock Angel summoned by the Tzardom was the sort of threat that could turn the tide of an entire battle, far from a mere heap of metal.

The Madam tactfully guided the conversation away from his experiences on his adventure, saying, “Yu gave me something called a ‘toner’ the other day. It worked so wonderfully that we were fighting over a bottle of it at first... How embarrassing.”

The Demon Lord gave another polite chuckle. “I’ll make sure to prepare a larger variety of cosmetics in the future. Moisturizers, lotions, sunscreens, cleansers, foundations, lipstick, nail polish, perfumes... Oh, UV masks may become a popular offering, as well. I long to see women like you, Madam, remain ever strong and brilliantly beautiful.”

Every time the Demon Lord spoke, the Madam’s heart beat faster. She didn’t exactly comprehend what the items were that the Demon Lord had just listed, but she knew from experience that, without a doubt, they were all things that could have unimaginable effects. “H-How...exciting,” she said, very much aware of the fact that the Demon Lord never exaggerated, turning anything he said, no matter how unbelievable, into reality. Knowing that she would become stronger and more beautiful with the aid of his creations, the Madam looked positively delighted. “By the way, my sister has won the Resort Voucher at auction, just as you’ve planned.”

“Oh...?” The Demon Lord wondered for a moment what in the world she was talking about, then managed to recall a distant memory of him handing one to McDonald, as a sort of a bonus.

“She can be quite stubborn, so no amount of persuading from me convinced her to come. My silly little sister, with no idea that she’s playing right into your hands.” The Demon Lord let out a chuckle and turned his gaze downward, sipping his tea. The Madam saw a man with infinite wisdom and confidence, enveloped in solemnity. Even without taking his supernatural powers into

consideration, the Demon Lord was plenty alluring to the Madam, and to many of the other ladies who visited the resort. In fact, a fair number of them secretly longed to spend their one night at the resort in the Demon Lord's bed, creating a sort of buzz that could otherwise only be found during overnight school trips. Some of the ladies declared their preference for Tahara, and the young advisor who had most recently joined the Demon Lord's roster was already gaining some admirers himself.

"Perhaps I'll bring some younger girls sometime. I think they'll be absolutely smitten by you and your advisors, Mister Demon Lord."

"You flatter me, Madam."

"And what will my sister think of the resort, not to mention this building...?" She shifted her gaze, as if to look into her past. Many years had passed since she and her sister had parted ways in a rather unamiable fashion. While they always kept an ear open for rumors of each other, they had seldom met face-to-face since. "Her faction may be low in numbers, but they make up for it in influence... I dare say her group is the most feared and respected group in all of Holylight."

"The Connoisseurs, I believe they're called."

"Nobles are vain by nature. Not that I have any room to talk."

"You've reconciled with the militaristic nobles?"

"I did. I can't have our differences getting in your way, Mister Demon Lord." This was the very reason that the Madam had put her pride aside and apologized in public, even sending reinforcements at a great cost to herself. At the end of the day, this was a testament to her political finesse. Somehow, despite the Demon Lord's non-involvement, history was made by him that day.

"None of your affairs, Madam, will ever be in my way. I simply thought that the only ones who would benefit from infighting were our foreign enemies," the Demon Lord explained, recalling his days in Japan. Parliament was filled with low-brow jeers and policies stuck in limbo. The Demon Lord had newfound respect for the Madam's tenacity.

"I did send over supplies, but that's far from a real fix. Weather's quite

unstable where the military nobles live, preventing them from growing crops in any substantial numbers.” There were limits to even the Madam’s resources. As long as their territory remained barren, they would always be stuck in poverty, relying on external aid. This predicament could be compared to the resource-based poverty crisis in modern Africa. The only permanent solution was to stimulate the local economy from the ground up through an influx of industry.

As the Madam pondered her conundrum, the Demon Lord simply stated, “Simple, really... They simply needed to be paid as the full-time military men that they are.” The Demon Lord lit a cigarette. By his logic, it was easier to hire them as professional soldiers than trying to do anything with their frigid wasteland. (Who are they, the *tondenhei*?) The Demon Lord thought of the troops tasked with defending *and* pioneering the northernmost prefecture of Hokkaido in late 19th century Japan. The concept of shoving the military into a plot of poor land and forcing them to live off of it and defend the country on top of that was utterly archaic. (The military has one job. To decimate the enemy. They shouldn’t waste their energy on anything else...) How could anyone expect everything and the kitchen sink from those soldiers? At the very least, the Demon Lord saw the military as an organization that deserved monetary pay, not a wasteland to survive off of. Even in feudal Japan, Oda Nobunaga had hired soldiers with coin, using them to exhaust his enemies by tirelessly attacking even during farming season. In the same manner, the current seasons of on-and-off combat in the Northern Nations would drastically change with the introduction of a full-time military.

“Mister Demon Lord, you’re going to...hire them all yourself?”

“To make a long story short, yes.”

“You’d need an exorbitant amount of coin to hire the *entire* military faction. You may be able to afford it for a short while, but—”

“It won’t last. Not with the income of the village of Rabbi as it stands. But if we were to gain control of a few lucrative mines, it would be a different story. Apparently, a certain noble felt brave enough to send a little cat burglar into the village.”

The Madam’s eyes widened as she correctly assumed whom the Demon Lord

was talking about. Meanwhile, the Demon Lord thought of the map that Tahara had shown him, with a large red circle around a territory to the west. (They want to mess with us, so I'll take some of their mines in return,) the Demon Lord decided, ready to take advantage of the fact that *they* were starting a fight with *him*. Of course, this was going to be a large-scale civil conflict.

"I see..." said the Madam. "That vile man is finally going to get what he deserves."

"Courageously, they seem to be preparing for war. I have no choice but to defend my villagers," the Demon Lord stated, as if it was a matter of fact. Of course, he had always accomplished whatever he set his mind to. After buying out the village to the east of Rabbi, he seemed to have no doubt in his mind when it came to expanding his territory. With an assumption that Tahara would take care of the gritty work, the Demon Lord was beaming with confidence. "If I may ask you of a favor, Madam. A simple one, really. I want you to spread a rumor among high society that I am positively *outraged* by whoever dared send that thief."

"Th-Then Dona will put his guard up!" the Madam protested, inadvertently using the noble's name.

The Demon Lord maintained his smile. "Exactly. I want him to put up the biggest guard he can muster. The more friends he can summon, the better. Saves me some time."

"If you say so..." The Madam realized that the Demon Lord aimed to end it all at once in a single blow. She expected many territories to become lord-less that day. "But I wonder if he'll go on the offensive once he hears the rumor."

"For some reason, lesser men always obsess with fortifying their defenses when they learn of an impending attack. What is the point in defending oneself if they won't even try to strike down the attacker?" Dona attacking him would be the best case scenario for the Demon Lord. Yu and Tahara had specialized skills for taking on larger groups, and no one could infiltrate the village undetected by Kondo's eyes. "Enough of such unpleasant talk. May I offer you a glass of this? A gift from an acquaintance of mine." The Demon Lord produced, of course, the bottle of Fire Spirit.

This wasn't a drink that even the Madam could easily get her hands on. "Is that...Fire Spirit? Where did you...?!"

The Demon Lord chuckled. "I had the opportunity to get to know a dwarf and some Anima."

"You really are...something else..." She smiled, taking the glass from him.

They raised a toast, both with pleasant smiles, and began chatting away about this and that: taking in the village to the east, the meeting between the Madam and White, the current gossip among nobles, some art pieces, the reputation of Rabbi... Each topic contained information worth piles of gold.

Having finished his glass of Fire Spirit, the Demon Lord concluded, "I plan to head north again soon. If I miss your sister, please give her my best regards."

"Of course... It would be nice to have some *sibling rivalry* after all this time." The thought of which apparently brought a grin to the Madam's face.

The Demon Lord raised his glass to that.

After a job well done, he was enjoying a cigarette in the Forest of Restoration. As it was designed to heal any and all ailments, he began to feel calm just by being there. (I'd better take care of my errand up north sooner than later...) In search of a more potent defense against magic, he would have to face a more challenging dungeon than the last. When he thought about going, Aku flashed in his mind, looking at him like a dejected puppy dog. The Demon Lord frowned. (What's wrong with me...? Why am I acting like I'm her dad?) No duration of contemplation gave him an answer.

"You really are a loner, aren't you? What are you doing here all alone?" Luna called from behind him.

"What's that? I couldn't hear you over your glass house shattering." The Demon Lord blew out a puff of smoke in exasperation, leaning back into a tree. The laborers must have been engaged in drink and merriment nearby, as a stream of laughter and music could be heard.

"Nice night..." Luna leaned back on the same trunk as him, gazing up at the sky. "This forest isn't too shabby." The tableau of the Demon Lord and a Holy

Maiden standing back-to-back with a tree between them was certainly peculiar.

“There’ll be more facilities around the village soon.”

“I’m happy to hear that... But you’d better not build anything promiscuous.”

“Promiscuous, huh? Just to be clear, a vibrant nightlife includes clubs, cabarets, burlesque theaters, host clubs, and brothels, both male and female.”

“Brothels...?! Wh-Why would we need those?!”

“Certain desires can’t be controlled by law. People will always find a way. Restrictions on base desires will only create an underground society and line the pockets of criminals willing to take advantage of it. With that in mind, the government should back the industry, ensuring that businesses are safe and respectful of their workers.” Another deterrent for restricting these business was the expected rise in sex crimes. The Demon Lord was exercising a bit of foresight to prepare Luna for the reality of ruling Rabbi, which would have no room for an oversimplified sense of morality.

“You actually sound like you know what you’re talking about, sometimes... Usually you’re just drinking.”

“Alcohol has always evolved with humanity. As I recalled, by 4000 B.C.E.—”

“Ugh! Enough of your academy lectures! In case you haven’t noticed, we’re all alone. Can’t you come up with a more romantic topic of conversation?”

“Where’s the romance in a dark forest...?” the Demon Lord grumbled, puffing out smoke. Besides, while Luna hadn’t noticed, they were not the only ones in the forest.

“Just thought I’d...thank you.”

“For what?”

“For what you did up north, and for the village...”

“No need to thank me. I’m just doing it of my own accord. In fact, I should thank you.”

Luna turned around in surprise to face the dark silhouette of the Demon Lord.

“Without you, or this village, I would not have been able to build such a solid

foundation,” the Demon Lord expressed genuinely. It wasn’t difficult for him to imagine that, as someone with such an inexplicable background, he could have ended up a wanted man. He might not have ended up in this position if it wasn’t for Luna’s title backing him up at every turn.

“R-Really...? That’s what’s been on your mind?”

“Mature adults think of these things. You’ll understand one day.”

“‘Mature’... Now don’t make me laugh,” Luna cheerfully mocked, poking the Demon Lord’s back with her finger... As if to recreate an old memory. “I have to say... You were pretty cool up there.”

“All I did was take out a hunk of metal,” the Demon Lord answered matter-of-factly.

At any other time, Luna might have barked back with a snippy retort. But not this time. “You know, I think I’m in love with you...”

“What?” This shook the Demon Lord enough to make him turn around, but Luna was fast walking away through the trees.

“You’ve shot through the heart of the most elegant princess in the world,” she called, “so you’d better not disappoint me!”

“Hey, wait a minute...” the Demon Lord muttered, as Luna left the forest. Then, looking rather awkward, he called to one still standing in the woods, “When are you going to show yourself?”

“I-I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to—I didn’t expect things to...” Eagle emerged from behind a tree, mumbling apologetically. The Demon Lord sighed. She clearly hadn’t expected their conversation to go this way. Her cheeks were as red as if she had just made a declaration of love herself. “Wh-What are you going to... How are you going to respond?”

“Is that what you wanted to ask me? Surely there was some other reason why you came to see me.”

“Um, yes... But the shock of, um, what just happened, must have knocked it out of me...”

“That’s quite a pickle...” The Demon Lord lit a new cigarette. He certainly

hadn't expected to take part in a scene straight out of a teen romance movie, but had a good guess as to why Eagle wanted to see him. "Let me guess. You wanted to ask if you could keep staying in the village."

"Th-That's right..."

"Let me give it to you straight. There's no problem at all for you to be here."

"How can you be so sure...?" Eagle said, staring down at her feet. She might have been regretting not seeking advice from someone else.

"If you ever leave, Luna will forcibly bring you back here. It's pointless."

"B-But..."

"It's up to you to feel grateful or annoyed to have a friend like her. That being said..."

"Yes...?"

"It's not easy to find a true friend. Nor is it easy to lose one." Friends came and went with age and changes in environment, but there were friendships that remained through it all. The Demon Lord seemed to think that Eagle and Luna's was one of them. "You haven't seen her in a long time, right? Try smiling for a change. It's really annoying to see your pouting face 24/7." The Demon Lord grabbed Eagle's cheeks and pinched them into a forced smile. His reaction might have had something to do with the fact that Eagle witnessed the embarrassing interaction between him and Luna.

"Y-You can't just force me to smile..." Eagle said through her pinched face.

"No one *really* likes a damsel in distress. Besides, aren't you a hawk? Why do you go by Eagle?"

Eagle wriggled away from the Demon Lord's grasp, and caught her breath with her hand on her chest. "Legend has it, hawk-hybrids once soared the skies with the Ember Angel..."

"Legend, huh? And?"

"That invited the devils' wrath... Until they were hunted to extinction."

"I see, so you chose to go by a different species."

“I’ve heard that Eagle-hybrids were pushed to the brink of extinction, too, since they were similar. The other Anima considered them a cursed race that attracted devils...”

The Demon Lord let out a long sigh, now that Eagle had confirmed her tragic backstory that set her up perfectly as the damsel in distress. “Well, I get it now... I won’t *force* you to smile, but if you stick around this village, you’ll eventually remember how to smile again.” The Demon Lord chuckled as his own words reminded him of Zero. This thought made his gaze more kind, somehow. “Whether your race is cursed or not, you do have a good friend. I’ll take after Luna’s example and won’t accept no for an answer. Even from the god that may rule this world.” With that, the Demon Lord walked away.

Eagle was left watching him, speechless. Once more, the Demon Lord seemed full of strength and confidence, ready to force all of the laws and unfairness of the world to bend to his will. (You fell in love with an incredible man, Luna... You’ve got your work cut out for you...) Eagle nearly felt dizzy putting herself in Luna’s shoes, who had climbed the ranks of society from orphan to Holy Maiden, and had now professed her love for an entity straight out of mythology. If she wanted to stand by Luna on equal footing, Eagle thought, she would have to learn to be dauntless, even in the face of a god. For the time being, she simply gazed up at the night sky, intimidated by the entire prospect.

Fallen Angel Lucifer

The Demon Lord was on his way to the Field Hospital, wanting to set everything in order before heading north. He was uncharacteristically in a rush as he walked through the empty rehabilitation district that was usually flooded with patients.

“Mister Secretary,” Yu greeted him with a smile.

The Demon Lord acknowledged her and entered the exam room before silently turning off Assault Queller. It would have gotten in the way of the procedure he was about to undergo. In a haste, the Demon Lord hung his coat and suit jacket on hangers and yanked his tie off. As he partially unbuttoned his shirt, he heard Yu exhale. “Let’s get started, Yu.”

“Y-Yes, Sir...! But are you...sure?”

“Yes. Do it.”

Timidly, yet with strange anticipation, she activated Censorship. The Demon Lord had commanded her to *overwrite* his age to 18. This would commence the Demon Lord’s grand, once-in-a-lifetime performance.

“Excuse me, Sir...” Yu’s hand operated at blinding speed, augmenting the Demon Lord’s age. Despite the supernatural effect of the procedure, it had been performed much too easily. Now a young man who resembled a black blade stood where the Demon Lord was. The tense air about him suggested that any who dared lay a finger on him would erupt in dark flames. This was about the age when those around Hakuto Kunai were beginning to suspect that he would take an important role in government one day. They were right, as Kunai started his career as an elite government official and climbed his way up. After climbing as high as the ladder would go, and once his *project* was approved, Kunai had found himself as one of the rulers of the Empire, marking the beginning of their glorious reign and ultimate destruction.

“Hm. This brings back memories,” the Demon Lord remarked without much

sentiment.

Yu, on the other hand, held her mouth and nose with the back of her hand, letting out a strange squeal. It seemed as if she was about to have a nosebleed from the elation of beholding the younger Demon Lord. “M-Mister Secretary? Are you sure I shouldn’t *ensor* you some more? Perhaps to the age of 8...”

“Nonsense. Then my plan won’t stand.” The Demon Lord performed consecutive Item Creations to generate a pair of new objects called the Fallen Angel Wings and Fallen Angel Garb. There had been many video games that utilized weapons and armor based on angels and demons, and these pieces from the game were another example, along with the Angel’s Ring and Devilish Horns. “I’m going to change my clothes, Yu.”

“Y-Yes, Sir! I’m happy to assist.”

“I-I was asking you to step outside for a moment...”

“I wouldn’t dare! What if something happens to you, Sir?! Please?!”

“I’ve reactivated the Queller. Don’t worry.”

The Demon Lord managed to convince Yu to step out of the room and began changing his clothes. Naturally, the items he had just created were fashion items without any practical stat bonuses. If a player wearing these would have charged into battle, they would have been vaporized on the spot. (Now these give off a strong 90s vibe...) he thought, reminiscing while looking at his now-spiky hair reflected in the mirror. The 90s was the height of punk bands, and the streets were filled with young men and women who dressed just as he was now. The clothes were torn here and there, with an arm and a leg wrapped in chains, for some reason. All in all, it was a stereotypical all-black punk outfit. (The clothes are one thing, but these wings... I feel like it’s Halloween.) The Demon Lord resigned himself to his fate and attached the Fallen Angel Wings to his back. It was one of his strong points, after all, that he was willing to do just about anything once he set his mind to it. (It’s been a while, but this thing is definitely over the top...) The wings consisted of six large feathers on either side, each of them gleaming a sinister sheen. Still, it was a garbage item with a Defense of 2. Nevertheless, its properties were undoubtedly real, just as they were designed.

The Demon Lord's cutting looks, attire, and the dark aura exuding from his wings now completely solidified his appearance as the Fallen Angel himself, just as he had appeared in ancient songs.



“M-Mister Secretary... May I come in now?” Yu hurriedly knocked and much too eagerly burst into the room. As soon as she did, she let out another squeal. “Precious...! This look has its own arsenal of spices, doesn’t it, Sir...?!”

(Who am I, Dr Pepper?!) The Demon Lord resisted the urge to shout, and then felt relieved that she hadn’t burst out laughing. If she had, he doubted that he would be able to pull off his act.

“Mister Secretary... Could you...hold me, just for a moment?”

“What...?”

“Would you grant me this reward, Sir, before you take your time off?”

“W-Well... That’s...” The Demon Lord trailed off, looking awkward. He had brushed his promise to take her to the hot springs under the rug, and he was now taking advantage of her powers again. It seemed too cruel to not repay her in some way. “But won’t the chains hurt you if—”

“They won’t bother me in the slightest, Sir! In fact, that would be a bonus!”

“W-Wait a minute... Bonus?!”

Yu dove into his arms and buried her face in his chest. Relenting, the Demon Lord lightly put his arms around her, which prompted the unnecessarily high caliber wings to follow suit, embracing Yu with the set of pitch-black feathers. (What do you think you’re doing, wings?!) The Demon Lord fretted, but it was too late to do anything about it. The sight of Yu in her white lab coat contrasted against the bona fide Fallen Angel was filled with mystique. Still pressed into the Demon Lord’s chest, Yu’s face turned scarlet as her breathing hastened. The Demon Lord wrapped his arm around her waist, and she felt as if a hundred bolts of lightning had struck, electrocuting her from head to toe.

“Y-Yu...? Are you all right?”

“Y-Yes, Sir... I’m p-perfectly, well...!” Her bizarre reaction reminded the Demon Lord of Kondo, who had been acting like a character from a cheesy X-rated game. There was no pain in Yu’s expression though. In fact, she looked elated, as if she had been given all of the world’s happiness to herself.

“N-Now... I must be getting back to work,” the Demon Lord finally said.

“Y-Yes, Mister Secretary...” Yu crumpled as the Demon Lord vanished via Quick Travel, falling on all fours. She was breathing as heavily as a runner who had just finished a marathon. “The soul of the world... Lies within the Secretary!” Yu muttered this paradoxical claim and cackled loudly.

She was nearly skipping with joy for the rest of the day, smiling at every patient she saw as she watered the flowers, acting like a true goddess. Someone wasn’t laughing, however, and that was Cake, who had been peeping in on their interaction. (He finally showed his true colors... And *those* are his true colors?!) Cake had already seen different forms of the Demon Lord: his normal form, how he looked when his HP was half depleted, and now in the form of the Fallen Angel, exactly as depicted in myths. (That’s a legit monster right there! That’s... That’s the Ruler of Night!)

While Cake’s misunderstanding was being solidified, the Holy Castle was in a different type of turmoil.

——The Holy Castle, Holylight.

White and Gran were in conference in the office within the Holy Castle, a mountain of paperwork between them. White was the only one of the three Holy Maidens who was even remotely capable when it came to politics. As a consequence, she could not remember the last time she had a day off.

“That vile Dona!” Gran snarled. “Had the gall to tell me he’ll be hiking up Spell Stone prices.”

“Again? That’s not good...”

“The well-off nobles won’t be hurt, of course... This only worsens the poverty level of the common folk...”

Holylight in its current state was the embodiment of being stuck between a rock and a hard place. Dona lorded over the mines peppered throughout western Holylight, using his lucrative profits to keep many nobles and mercenaries on his payroll. To the north and near the border, the military nobles (with Harts at the helm) were acting suspiciously, and the Butterfly sisters each ruled as the empresses of high society and the art world in Central. Now, out of seemingly nowhere, White had just received the shocking news

that the military and high society nobles had joined forces. Without any knowledge of how this had been managed, White was naturally unsettled. (This country is changing... More drastically than ever before...)

To the east, the barren wasteland was home to numerous bandits who sought refuge from the central government. Beneath them, in the city, many of the poorer population were buying into Satanism, while the Northern Nations were waiting for an opening to take advantage of.

As a Holy Maiden, White's duties mostly involved performing rituals and representing the nation as a diplomat. In her authority, at most, she would be called to pass judgment on squabbles between two nobles. She held no power to enact any sort of reformation by any means.

Gran grimly stated, "Many nobles have their own land and do as they please. The Holy Church has become a husk of its former glory..."

"We're receiving less and less donations these days..."

"Hmph! Times have changed. Who knows *what* they'll ask of us if we accept their money."

White lifted her Angel's Ring off of her head and held it in her arms. She wanted something to lean on, as she felt like she was trapped with no way out.

Meanwhile, Gran saw a ray of hope in that ring. "If only the man who'd given you that ring would lend us his strength..." Her voice was pained, having lived many years in service only to see Holylight end up in its current state.

The sorrowful air of the office was interrupted by rushed stomps. A foot kicked the door open, and Queen marched in. "Oh the old bat's here, too? Perfect. Give me permission to cross the border."

"Where do you think you are?! For once in your life, won't you act like a Holy Maiden?!" Gran raged.

"I don't give a shit. Give me the permission."

"Wait, Queen," White interjected. "What do you mean, 'cross the border'?!"

The Holy Castle was enchanted with several defenses, but the most powerful of which was drastically reduced in strength when no Holy Maidens were within

its walls. That's why White mostly stayed inside the castle while Queen or Luna went out to deal with foreign threats.

"Tartarus..."

"Tartarus?!" White and Gran repeated in unison. They had no time to deal with a threat as trivial as Tartarus during these crucial times, not to mention that it was a problem for the Northern Nations now, not Holylight.

"Sir Zero always shows up when there's Tartarus."

"Th-That's your reason to—"

"Wait," Gran stopped White. "Is 'Zero' the rumored Dragonborn?" Much to White's surprise, Gran seemed interested in what Queen had to say. Whatever Zero was aiming for, it was undeniable that he had vanquished a high-ranking devil.

"No shit. I might get a clue or two if I go investigate Tartarus."

"From the rumors I've heard around town..." Gran stared at Queen. "You and the Dragonborn... have the hots for each other, isn't that right?"

"Wha—I... Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Who the hell's going around spreading a fucking rumor like that, huh...?!"

"Now, now... That's quite the reaction..." Gran was surprised at how red Queen's face had become. She hadn't believed the rumor before, knowing how berserk Queen could be. But now, Gran had something to consider. "White was given an Angel's Ring, and you're with the Silver Dragonborn... I wonder what signs these are..." Gran couldn't help but think of Luna, too. She had been tucked away in her remote land with a sketchy-sounding man who went by the title of Demon Lord. She wasn't going to brush three separate and bizarre encounters as coincidence.

"L-Like I was saying! I just need permission to get going!"

"Wait, Queen! You're bound to cause another commotion!"

"Huh?! That's some bullshit, Sis. When'd I ever make a mess?"

"Surely you haven't forgotten the Tragedy of Gatekeeper?!"

“What the hell? It wasn’t my fault the dickless idiot who came storming in was a major fucking pussy. I’d kill any thoughtless dipshit that’d come through that place.”

As the sisters bickered, Gran reached a conclusion, perhaps in a desperate attempt to break out of the corner they had been backed into. “Queen... I’ll consider giving you permission.”

“You for real, Old Bat?! Way to go!”

“Stop calling me an old bat! But I can’t give you permission *now*, you know?”

“Fuck yourself, Old Deer! You old, useless, piece-of-shit, trout—Ow!”

Gran slugged Queen over the head with her long staff as hard as she could. “Listen well, Queen. We can’t let you out during a time of such instability. I’ll consider it if things begin to settle. The Dragonborn may greatly aid our nation.”

“The fuck?! When are things gonna *settle*? Huh? Tomorrow? A minute from now?” Queen barked.

Gran only stared back in exasperation. “Easy, girl... How can you expect to catch yourself a man when you’re acting so desperate? At this rate, he would fall for White before you got a chance with him.”

“The fuck are you up to, Sis?! You man-stealing tramp!”

“How did I get roped into this?!”

The brutal interruption had brought their meeting to a halt. White decided to retire to her room at the heart of the castle and sat at her roundtable. She enjoyed the quietness of the room, due in no small part to thorough soundproofing. An altar stood behind the roundtable, framed by a solemn mural depicting the three angels. The divine air of the room suited her well.

“I wish I could see you...” White whispered. After watching Queen act completely on impulse, White was reminded that she was stuck in the castle. The man she wanted to see was within the borders of Holylight, but still out of her reach. Absentmindedly, White took a flower from the vase and began plucking its petals. “I’ll see him soon, no I won’t, I’ll see him soon, no I won’t... I’ll see him soon, no I...” That was the last petal. Holding the stem of the flower,

White began to quiver. “Why not?!” She screamed, plopping her head down on the table. She, just as much as Queen, was lovestruck.

“Now that’s a classic...”

White turned towards the voice to find someone sitting on the altar. With his legs brazenly crossed, it seemed as if he was outright insulting the angels in the painting.

(It can’t be...) White stared in disbelief at the distinct silhouette exuding an aura as dark as night itself. There was no mistaking it: she was face to face with the Fallen Angel Lucifer, sung of in legends.

Concerto in Black

“No... The Fallen Angel... Lucifer?!” White staggered out of her seat, her eyes widened in astonishment. She beheld the spectacularly black wings, feeling a wave of dark energy emitting from them that seemed to confirm the reality of Lucifer.

“It’s been a while, Holy Maiden White...”

White recognized the deep, resonating voice. When it spoke her name, she trembled all over. In the face of a mythical entity, she could no longer stand, and crumpled to the ground. Lucifer sat on the altar without trepidation, proudly keeping his legs crossed in defiance. White truly believed that this being would not fear any god.

“Is-Is that your true form...?” she asked, unable to keep her voice from shaking. Her body was still shaking, too, every inch of her skin having turned to goosebumps. Who could have blamed her? The real Lucifer had materialized before her. The mythos that she had studied since a young age had suddenly come to life. It was an understatement to say that her world was just turned upside down.

“Any physical form is temporary to me...” Lucifer answered.

For better or worse, White comprehended this. Surely, a deity of another dimension, like an angel, would exist in a different way than humans. In fact, legends tell of angels donning armor when fighting in battle, exuding an aura of valiance they hadn’t carried before. And those were nameless, ordinary angels. White was sure that things like physical appearance meant close to nothing to the Ruler of Night, the one who rebelled against the Great Light. Of course, the worst part was that Akira Ono wasn’t lying; he considered any form in this world to be temporary.

(Master Lucifer... You’re so beautiful... And...) The air in the room seemed sharp enough to break skin. Lucifer’s threatening appearance exuded beauty and instilled fear. Even so, White saw an unstable air about him that she

couldn't ignore. This might have been attributed to her motherly nature paired with the legend of Lucifer's exile from the heavens; she had always imagined a twinge of loneliness in that story. (He really is as I envisioned...)

To someone like White who had lived her life perfectly, Lucifer was a pitiful deity who, despite his enormous powers, had made a grave mistake along the way. She had always imagined him to have a boyish recklessness, as he never relented in his own philosophy even after his exile. The fact that the Fallen Angel chose to appear to her in a form similar in age to her only added to her impression of him.

The Fallen Angel in black, the Demon Lord, climbed down from the altar and approached her. With every step, as he neared, White could feel her heart beating faster. She was staring into the night itself, with pitch-black eyes that seemed to pierce through anything.

"I'll show you the real thing," he said. "Take hold."

"O-Okay..." White wrapped her arms around the Demon Lord's waist. Furthermore, she buried her face in his chest, pressing as much of her body against his as she could. This was more of a lover's embrace than anything else.



The Demon Lord had only meant to have her hold onto some part of his body, but White had taken drastic action, recalling the last time the Demon Lord performed a miracle.

Of course, she had the perfect excuse. “Th-This is the correct position, isn’t it...? We have to be like this to perform miracles...?”

“Y-Yeah... Sure.” The Demon Lord averted his eyes from White’s pleading gaze. With two soft cushions pressing into him, the Demon Lord started to feel a little dizzy. White was dressed like a bona fide angel, her Angel’s Ring only adding to her allure.

The pointlessly high-caliber Fallen Angel wings spread and folded around White’s body. Feeling the embrace of the wings that ruled the night, and with the sensation that she was living a scene straight out of a legend, her face turned a beaming red.

The completely involuntary movement of his wings made the Demon Lord want to shout: (What the hell are you doing, you perverted wings?! This is only pressing her breasts into me more!) Despite the solemn air he was trying to portray, the interactions between them had turned into slapstick comedy. The Demon Lord had planned to pull off the performance of a lifetime playing the ultra-suave Fallen Angel that White thought him to be, but now he felt like he had walked into a honeypot, and the color drained from his face as remembered their bath together. (You gotta be kidding me... I’d better get out of here, quick!) Fearing that, if anyone were to walk in, he would be burned alive for sexually harassing the Holy Maiden, the Demon Lord swiftly Quick Traveled.

Wings, carry me away...

That was the line the Demon Lord had uttered on the spot to make Quick Travel seem more like magic. But now, White took the incantation literally, concluding that the previous miracle must have also been made possible by these dark wings.

(I get to experience the miracle with Master Lucifer again...!)

They vanished in an instant and materialized on the rooftop of the Casino.

The neon signs that shone in every color of the rainbow reflected in White's eyes. She could also see below them more activity than she ever thought possible in this desolate village. Countless little shops lined the streets, and well-built stores filled the Business District. Considering the number of buildings under construction, the village was turning into quite the city.

"Are we in... the village of Rabbi...?"

"We are."

"How is that large fountain...? Wait, there can't be a forest out here..." White blanked, her mind overloaded with questions and confusion. She couldn't believe her eyes. She tightened her grip around the Demon Lord's waist, pulling them even closer together.

"In any case, you can let go now," the Demon Lord said.

"No, thank you..."

"What?!"

"Wh—Um, n-n-n-n-never mind what I said. I was just talking to myself..." White politely distanced herself, prompting a concealed sigh of relief from him. He doubted that any man in this world could withstand being embraced by this angelic woman for long.

Having finally caught his breath, the Demon Lord began telling White in many words how he made the eastern village offer their land to Luna, and his projection that eastern nobles would continue to join his ranks after seeing the prosperity of the village. (Things won't be pretty if she gets suspicious of us. I've gotta explain everything nice and cleanly.) In summary, the Demon Lord explained that lords presenting their land to the Holy Maidens would be of no detriment to her.

"Offering their land..." White repeated.

"There is no point in keeping around a lord or lady who only sees their people as tax revenue. These toxic rulers should be replaced with those more worthy to rule." The Demon Lord wrapped it up in a convincing statement, watching for White's reaction. She seemed calm and accepting. In fact, from a strictly business perspective, White and the Church would only benefit from this deal.

“I doubt anyone would complain about the land in the east...” White said. It would have been a different story if the Demon Lord had settled in a different region, but eastern Holylight was an arid wasteland. Nobles that ruled this region were called pseudo-or wannabe-nobles, ignored by Central and the west. Moreover, Holylight preached that hard work and paving one’s own path were the doctrine of the Wise Angel. Nobles were cold to those without power, after all, and didn’t consider those who settled in a desolate wasteland as equal to them.

“But no matter how much land from the east is offered to us...” White said, audibly pained. Those who knew Holylight well knew that one could hardly give away eastern land, much less sell it. They were viewed as all baggage and no profit. What’s more, bandits were left unchecked, and it was a breeding ground for Satanists. No one could feasibly turn enough of a profit to justify taking any land in these parts.

“My answer lies in the view...” The Demon Lord cryptically prompted White to look down from the roof again. She didn’t see a village, or even a town, but something else entirely. Tahara had designed a well-organized city that was unlike any other in this world. Rabbi’s structure was all preplanned, with the land below it leveled in meticulous detail, eliminating any height variation. The roads were ridiculously large, too, and shops kept plenty of space between each other. Everything about the city went against the current norm of cramming as many buildings as possible in limited space. The spaciousness of this layout provided a calmness and tranquility that could not be found anywhere else. High-traffic roads were always organized by intersections where workers with flags stood to stop carriages and give directions to pedestrians. Upon closer inspection, White noticed the constant flow of people carrying various construction materials. The hired mages, meanwhile, continuously cast Reinforce and Affix to these materials. The hustle and bustle almost seemed otherworldly.

“It’s like a festival...” White muttered.

The Demon Lord laughed, having enjoyed watching the village’s expansion himself. It was a much more dynamic version of a sandbox game come to life.

“Festival...” he repeated. “Of course. I might as well aim to make it a Mega

City.”

“Mega...?”

“A city with a population of ten million people.”

“Ten million?!” White shouted in astonishment.

The Demon Lord had simply chosen that number because it was the highest tier in the city development game he used to play. At the same time, the Demon Lord going full-force into expanding and bettering his territory would be of great value to the people of eastern Holylight. The Demon Lord was acting completely in self-interest, trying to unlock all of his admin features, but those who were going to receive the benefits of his operations would see him as a saving grace... And White saw him in the same light. She had just witnessed the overturning of a land that everyone had thought untouchably barren. She didn't know what else to call it but another miracle.

“Are you going to build a new country?” White asked.

“A new country, huh...?” The Demon Lord maintained a seemingly thoughtful silence, but thoroughly rejected the idea on the inside. He couldn't imagine who would want to come to a fantasy world just to play king. (Leave that for a dreamy-eyed kid...) Above all else, the Demon Lord still strove to unlock all of his features. Eventually, the Demon Lord broke the silence and replied, “Countries are not created at will...”

“They are a natural consequence, you mean?” White jumped to finish the Demon Lord's milquetoast response.

The Demon Lord tried to answer, but couldn't find the words. So, the cunning mastermind that he was, he decided to change the subject. “I have an enemy to face. Some *being* that rules this world.” This was true. His enemy had yet to show themselves, but they had made clear their animosity and malice towards the Demon Lord. Of course, White could take this in no other meaning than the Demon Lord preparing to take on the Great Light. Who else could be a worthy foe to Lucifer?

“You're going to rebel once more...” White inferred.

(What do you mean “once more?!”) the Demon Lord silently screamed,

clueless to the subtext of her comment. This wasn't the first time someone had said something of this nature to him, and he had no idea how to respond. "Who knows how many battles there have been, but I will emerge the victor this time. And in a total victory, for that matter."

"H-How can you be so sure?"

"I never imagine myself losing. Besides..."

"Besides...?"

The Demon Lord thought of his eight advisors and the Demon Lord of the Empire that stood above them. The mere nine of them had always defeated waves upon waves of players, seizing victory after victory. The memories of taking on die-hard players from around the world prevented the Demon Lord from even imagining the possibility of his defeat. "I have allies I've never had before..." he finally replied, staring into White's eyes. Considering that he and his advisors had always fought players on their own, he was definitely at an advantage now that he could hire adventurers, military men, and even mercenaries.

However, this was a dangerous thing to say in a world of glimmering neon that made it seem like he and White were the only people in the world. White stood there, frozen with shock and practically forgetting to breathe. "You consider me...your ally?" she asked.

"Of course. I'm counting on you." The Demon Lord was ready to work with the rulers of the nation like White and Luna, and was prepared to compensate them appropriately. Their current conversation, however, maintained their misunderstanding.

Soon, White approached the Demon Lord, staring deep into his dark eyes. "I know not of the true events of old... Nor how deep your feud runs. But..."

"Hm?"

"I believe in the miracle I see before me, and the Ring you've given me."

(Miracle...?) The Demon Lord contemplated the unfamiliar word, when White quietly reached out her hands and pulled his head closer. Before he knew it, the Demon Lord found his face buried in cloud-like softness. The overwhelmingly

gentle embrace kept the Demon Lord silent.

“I will protect you from anything. Even the Light...”

“F-Fine...” the Demon Lord awkwardly grunted before hurriedly raising his head from White’s bosom. It was too tempting to lay his head in those heavenly cushions forever. Just as he did, the uselessly high-caliber Fallen Angel wings spread wide, pulling White close in an embrace. This time, the wings seemed to have activated a useless visual effect with it, making shimmering black feathers fall all around them.

Amidst the whirl of black feathers, in the middle of glimmering neon lights, White’s cheeks reddened in intoxication. Her hands slowly wrapped around the Demon Lord’s waist. “I will return you to the angel that you were...” They had created a divine tableau, a dark and a light angel embracing. Something inside the Demon Lord had finally surrendered to White’s stoic innocence. He wondered if any man had ever overcome a determined woman, especially when standing a little closer to the clouds than the rest of the world.

The Demon Lord thought of a day in his distant memory. The clock struck midnight in his head, reverberating the powerful genesis of something...an unending concerto.

The dark angel played a tune, and the world danced to it. The ever-playing concerto was sure to rewrite the entire world. While he wasn’t any deity or character of legend, he was unmistakably the creator of the world.

Remaining SP — 1358p

Memorial: The New Hire

——42-OMG Japan Branch, 2007.

A week after the bombing of the office building, Akira was standing in a meeting room within the 42-OMG office. 42-OMG was a world-class video game company that also served as a major investment firm, with stakes in the real estate, medical, and transport industries. To match their international profile, the meeting room was occupied by people of various backgrounds. Each of them shared a dauntless expression, and their styles of dress varied from casual to Lolita. One member even had dreadlocks. No one in Japan would have guessed that this was a company meeting.

“Alright, gang. Meet the newbie,” Aoki said, and the rest of the meeting room shifted their gazes uninterestedly to the man standing beside Aoki. This particular department was staffed with the best of the best, which made them extremely self-centered and prideful. “This is Ono. He’ll be joining the new project as a consultant.” Akira bowed politely, despite the frozen air of the meeting room. It was written all over the faces of the existing members that they expected Akira to quit before they could remember his name. In truth, Aoki’s department was the front lines of the company and had one of the quickest turnarounds. Many employees had quit, unable to bear the workload or the devastatingly high threshold for talent in the department. “Ono’s an ‘honorary team-lead,’ so he’ll be in charge of you guys.” This finally prompted a response from the colorful employees, who all seemed disgusted by the idea of some random guy waltzing in and giving them orders.

“Yo, you’re telling me this *chico’s* your *bastardo*, boss?” called the Latin-African-looking man. All of the department members were fluent in most major languages, including Japanese, from working with people from around the world. The room chuckled at the remark.

“Or is he Mikimoto’s?” a white woman with flowing blonde hair chimed in. “I like this company, but I’m not cool with nepotism.” All existing members

seemed hell bent on believing that this was all a joke.

“That would have been funny if he was anyway near as good-looking as I am. Come on, introduce yourself, will you?”

Akira took a step forward and gave a smile. Now he had the full attention of the room. “I’ve already installed my game into the computers in front of you. I’ve been tweaking it non-stop for the past 72 hours or so, but it’s far from polished. I want to use this as a springboard to rebuild the world from scratch.” This was more of a work memo than an introduction.

Scowls spread across the room. Most of them viewed the Japanese as humorless and robotic workaholics. Jumping right into work without so much as a ‘nice to meet you’ had only confirmed their views.

“Hey, Akira, was it? What’s—”

“This game is my introduction,” Akira firmly answered. The rest of the room dramatically shrugged, and the few Japanese members chuckled. “You will be killing each other over the next week.” All semblance of jubilation had faded from their faces.

“What the...?!”

“Oof...”

“Ono. Is that your name? What in the world are you talking about?!”

As the meeting room became more cacophonous, Akira walked out without another word. He seemed to believe that playing his game was the quickest way for them to get to know him. Naturally, the rest of the room was not too happy with his attitude.

“Phew... I’d better implement that idea I came up with earlier...” Akira turned his gears in the smoking room of the office, working on a cigarette. Apparently, he was completely uninterested in the commotion in the meeting room.

Aoki joined him, pinching his brow. “You got some character, kid. A few of them are pissed enough to want off the project.”

“Let them. I was going to do it alone in the first place.”

Aoki didn’t argue with that, because he believed that Akira *would* finish the

game on his own, no matter how many years it took. So, he decided to change the subject. “Ever heard of VR...?”

“V... R? What’s that?” Akira asked. Aoki theatrically lit a cigar, and enjoyed it for some time.

“Hey, drop the suspense, will you? Just tell me already,” Akira asked again.

“You’d be waiting for years with that attitude of yours... Hey, kid. What’s the magic word when you’re asking for a favor?”

“Dammit, fine! Oh, please, Director Aoki! Won’t you bestow your infinite wisdom onto old, pea-brained me?!”

“Is that the best you can do? I take it your parents never used the belt...” Still, Aoki began to explain VR technology. It had a surprisingly long history, with its first iteration in the 1960s. After numerous technical innovations, it had reached industries outside of video games by 2007. Street View, for example, had already been implemented in Google Maps. In a gist, it was an imaginary space. Another world that could be experienced through this technology.

Akira leaned forward as Aoki went on. “What’re you saying...? We can make a whole other world and go into it?”

“That’s the nitty and gritty.”

This was years before VR technology became mainstream and used in various video games. 42-OMG, however, had begun developing their own iteration using their state-of-the-art technology, performing various tests on it.

“We’ve been building a medieval European town on the president’s orders. Wanna dive in?”

“Yes! Right now! Like Lupin the Third!”

“H-Hey, hold on! I’m not wasting this cigar. Wait ’til I’m done.”

“Your bandit-looking ass is being cheap about a cigar?!”

“Who’re you calling a bandit?!”

The pair bickered their way out of the smoking room.

The next morning, Akira finally stepped out of the office and into the city lit by

the sunrise. Judging from his utter contentment, he seemed to have spent the whole night in virtual reality.

“Another world... It’s amazing! Ha! I can’t stop smiling!”

“A happy Akira? That’s a rare find!”

“Huh?” Akira turned around to see XX, who put their arm on Akira’s shoulder.

“Today was your first day, right? Buy me a drink or something.”

“You idiot. It’s supposed to be the other way around.”

“You gotta subvert expectations, man... I’m short on *moola* this month, know what I’m saying?”

“Your life’s a moola. When are you gonna get a job?”

XX maintained the usual smile. In fact, they lifted their arm from Akira’s shoulder and hooked it around his. “All right, Akira. I get your drift. You want me to pay you back with my body, is that it, you filthy animal?!”

“Go check yourself into a hospital. One with padded walls.”

“You’re going to force me down and try to breed me, aren’t you?! Well, I’ll never have your children!”

“I’m grabbing a cab.” Akira hailed a taxi, ignoring XX.

“Hey, you can afford a cab but you can’t feed me?!”

“Shut up, already... Get in. Let’s get some Chinese.”

“Hell yeah! I love you Akira! Marry me!”

“Gross... Beef bowls it is.”

“What the eff, man? We’re getting a divorce. Gimme half your money.”

“You little... If I was Buddha, I’d still kick your ass.”

And so, Akira’s future began, brimming with hope. A single leaf floating in the wind had finally landed firmly on the ground. If any historians were to describe this day, they would call it a turning point. This day was when Akira Ono’s glorious legacy, and his subsequent fall from grace, began.

Postscript

Thank you for reading Volume 6. Kurone Kanzaki, the author, here.

I'm writing this in early August, but boy, is it hot. First it was all the rain, then the record heat, and of course COVID going on all year... I'm sure many of you feel particularly exhausted this year, mentally and physically. I hope this book has blown away even a little bit of any gloominess in your life.

I can't help but wish that Doctor Yu was real, especially in times like this... But on the other hand, while she may be able to create a vaccine, I think a million people a year would die of suspicious circumstances.

I've noticed that my volumes are often published in summer. I've heard that most series drop in sales after the anime concludes, but thanks to readers like you, both the novel and the manga have been going strong. Thank you again to everyone who've enjoyed DLR.

Now in Volume 6, the Demon Lord returns to the village of Rabbi. I wanted to explore reunions in this volume above all else. No matter how the story progresses, checking back in on old characters will always be a part of the Demon Lord's job description. Reunions can be cheery, romantic, wholesome... I plan to take my time writing how all of these characters become one big family.

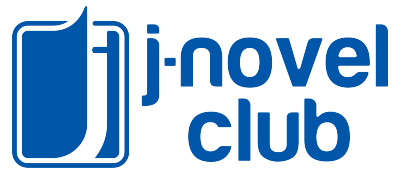
Of course, they're just a gang of troublemakers to those who're living on their continent. With the addition of Kondo, I expect the Demon Lord's party to grow more fun and exciting.

I hope you'll continue to tag along for the Demon Lord's wacky adventures.

See you in Volume 7!

-Kurone Kanzaki





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Demon Lord, Retry! Volume 6

by Kurone Kanzaki

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